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Chaya Ziskind

They watched over us ...

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DEDICATION.

My dearest Parents,Aunts, Uncles and Cousins who perished in the holocaust, I dedicate this book to your loving memory.

Also to my darling sister Sifa who agonised over our fate and died in Russia in 1986.

To my beloved departed husband, Morris, I thank you for the forty two wonderful years we spent together and for making it possible for me to be reunited with Sifa after an eighteen year separation.

To my dearest sister Mira, thank you for "holding my hand" through the the most trying times of our lives.

To my dear friend, the late Bella Dreyer, thank you for the hours spent together translating my manuscript from the original Yiddish copy.

Finally I am eternally grateful to my darling grand-daughter, Ruthie for her help in producing the final copy of my memoirs and to all my children and grandchildren for giving meaning to my survival.

CHAYA ZISKIND

Letter from the Translator

Chaya asked me whether I would help her translate her memoirs and many were the day when I became so involved emotionally that I'd try to think back and say to myself: "What was I doing at that very moment when all this was happening to Chaya - we are of the same age - we were of the same age living in the same world".

" How would I have acted, - coped - would I have succumbed".

Chaya wrote her memoirs in Yiddish in Paris in 1946, soon after Liberation. Her cousin persuaded her to write down her traumatic experiences, while they were fresh in her memory.

This she did and immediately proceeded to forget all ... and started living ... the resiliance of youth.

Many a time when I sat with Chaya translating the Yiddish passages into English from her most treasured album she would remark " If I didn't know that this is my handwriting I wouldn't have believed that some of these experiences really happend to me. To me and my sister Mira and to the "6 company" as we, our group of 'special' friends, were nicknamed and when I think of the degradation we were forced to endure I shudder ...

Hundreds of Survivors of the Holocaust emerged from their cocoons and started prodding one another into writing about their experiences, in order to dispel the untruths of the headlines which appeared in newspapers in Europe and America during the 1970's and 1980's.

"It is a MYTH that Six Millions Jews perished in the camps at the hands of HITLER and his NAZIS", "This is all PROPAGANDA", "IT DID NOT HAPPEN".

For 40 years Chaya Ziskind (born Tarschis) and other survivors of the Holocaust refused to relive their Horrific Nightmares of the camps. - The disappearance of their beloved ones,
- their mothers, their fathers, their brothers, their sisters, their complete families.

They pushed these memories to the back of their minds. But now, NOW. A time had come when it was imperative for their children, for their grandchildren to know and believe: yes - believe what had happened between the years 1940 and 1945.
These memoirs are dedicated to those six million 6,000,000 who died - who perished because they were Jews.
REMEMBER!! ZCHOR!! G'DAYNKEN!!

Bella Dreyer

Chapter 1

THE HOLOCAUST - A SURVIVOR RELATES

I am in the autumn of my life and often look back to the lost spring years of 1940-1941. It seems a good time now, as I am in the sort of mood to take you, my dear children and friends, on a journey into those pregnant years, filled with hope, enthusiasm, dreams and sufferings.

The memories become clearer:

It is spring 1941, one year after the Russian occupation. Nature is ripe and ready to engulf us, the youth, into her outstretched arms. Everything around us blooms. The birds are back from their migratory vacation and fill the air with their melodious singing.

How carefree was the youth in the "Jewish" Kovno. Every one of us was full of hope for the future. At that time I was sitting for my final examination in matric. The examinations were in full swing, and thereafter I hoped to enter the university to study Architecture. All the encouragement had come from my drawing instructor who used to say, "You will be the second female architect in Lithuania." (At that time his wife was the only female architect in the land.) I was sure that he was joking, but it left an indelible impression on my mind.

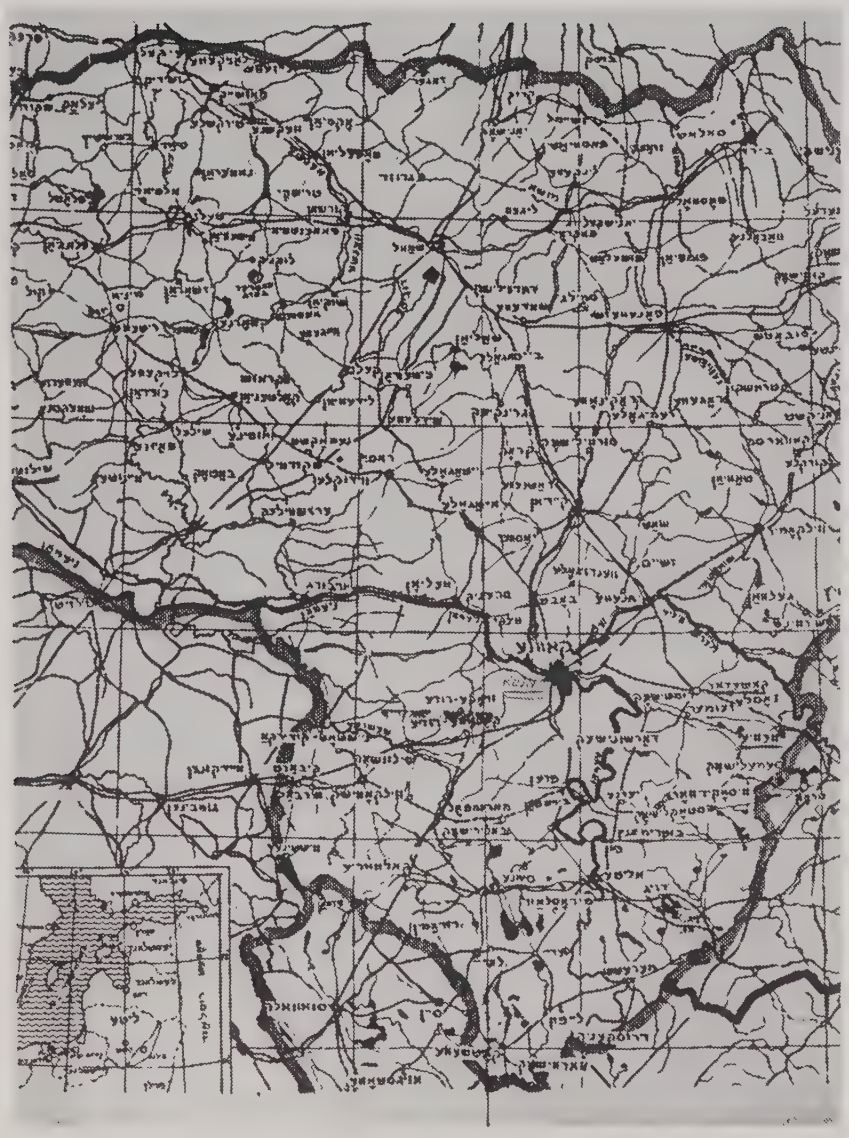
At that time, I was also a member of a sports club and was chosen with six other girls to represent the club at the Moscow Sport Festival in athletics and gymnastics. I was looking forward to this event with much enthusiasm.

Our dear parents had such high hopes for their three daughters. Our beloved Father would always say that he was the luckiest and richest man in the world. He was endowed with three millions.

Schooling in those days was very expensive, but nothing was too expensive for our dear parents. Although Father worked on jobs as a manager most of the time, we went to good schools, received piano tuition and my sisters, Sifa and Mira, received higher educations. Sifa, the eldest, recently married, had already attained two degrees at the university. Mira, a pharmacist, worked in one of the biggest pharmacies in town.

In our home there reigned always an atmosphere of warmth, love and understanding. A home that every person would have been proud of. Our dear Father was just the essence of love and kindness and our darling Mother - a pillar of strength and wisdom. Being the eldest in her family, everyone turned to her for advice and help. All this paved for us a healthy, happy and solid foundation for the future and this I would like to pass on to you, my darling children.

All this idyllic life and hope was wiped out, obliterated in one stroke. Who could have imagined that we stood on the threshold of the greatest human catastrophe?



The map of Lithuania

My dear Parents: Ida and Leibe

My father and me, 1936

My Cousin Sioma and me, 1925

The three sisters: Sifa, Mira and me (circa 1929)

Our first reunion in 1966 in Israel

Chapter 2

My brother-in-law Abrasha, Sifa's husband, being a party man, was at this time director of the Trade Commission. Their headquarters had moved to Vilna, the new capital. He left for Vilna on Monday to look for accommodation and on the Friday Sifa went to join him. I saw her off at the station with a light kiss on the cheek. She was very worried and sad to leave, as our dear Father had had a gallstone attack the previous day, but she promised to return within a few days. Those few days stretched out to be eighteen long years before I saw her once more. Much water has flowed under the bridge for both of us during those long years.

It was in the early hours of Sunday morning. I was woken up by my Mother's gentle touch and with the words, "Get up, my child, war has broken out." How sad and frightened my darling Mother looked and how shocking those words sounded to me. They rang in my ears for many years afterwards. In the distance, shots could be heard as well as bombs exploding continuously. The sky was of a brilliant hue.

Already, on that Sunday morning, many Jews were fleeing by different means of transport. Not everybody though, reached his destination. Many were shot on the way by the oncoming German army, others were caught and tortured by the Lithuanian partisans (Fascists). Only some were lucky to reach safety, namely Russia.

From the Polish and German refugees who had fled and reached Kovno, we heard about and understood what awaited us, but tried to push the terrible thoughts away. With our darling Father sick in bed and Sifa away, we felt quite helpless.

On Sunday morning, I ran to the chemist to fetch medicine for my Father. While I waited, the sirens went off. The streets suddenly became deserted. Everyone ran into nearby houses or courtyards for cover. My Mother phoned and asked that I be kept at the chemist until the danger passed. I would not dream of being separated from my dearest ones while danger lurked around us. I took the medicine and ran out of the chemist. I hugged the walls of the buildings on the way, hearing only my own heartbeat in the stillness around me. Suddenly, I felt myself being dragged by the arm into one of the courtyards and stood there facing a group of pale, frightened people. One of my non-Jewish schoolmates, who recognised me, pulled me to safety.

The curfew did not last long and I returned home.

The families of the Russian army officials, who occupied the front section of the building we lived in, confronted us by saying that if the situation should worsen, we would be evacuated with the whole of the civilian population. It was only wishful thinking, because many of them did not themselves manage to escape in time.

The next night also passed without sleep. We waited for news from Sifa, but in vain. The phone would ring, but by the time we reached it , it had stopped. We did find out later that it had been Sifa. She had wanted us to join her in Vilna. They were fleeing with the Central Committee to Russia, but how could we reach them?

Our landlady, whose husband had been captured by the Russians as a traitor and was never seen again, was very kind to us. Out of the goodness of her heart, early on Monday morning, she came to fetch us and took us to the shelter, because in the early days of the war, the Jews were subjected to great dangers.

In the shelter, we were the only Jews amongst our Lithuanian neighbours, some of them, our worst enemies. Quite often they threatened to expose us, but were silenced by our kind landlady. The Lithuanian partisans were ruthless and they commandeered everything in the city in the first days of the war. They killed Jews in the masses.

Before the Russians left Kovno, we had the job of destroying some communist literature belonging to our cousin Elinke, who had lived with us during the Russian occupation of Lithuania. His parents were living in a small provincial town, while he attended a school in Kovno. My cousin, being left-minded, had the opportunity to escape to Russia in time, but had to leave all his political literature with us. This we immediately started to burn, but feared that the smoke might arouse suspicion. We therefore proceeded to tear it up page by page and throw it down the toilet. It was not easy and very nerve-racking.

Twenty years later, on a visit to my darling sister in Russia, I again met Elinke, and reminded him of the risky task he had given us. He held two positions: a judge and afterwards the director of the Panar museum. (Panar was a forest near Vilnius, where 100,000 people were murdered and buried by the Germans and their loyal Lithuanian helpers.)

On a subsequent trip some years later, we had the sad duty of visiting his grave on the 55th anniversary of his birth.

On the Tuesday, we too decided to move on. Thinking back to that time, I realise that it was sheer madness. We packed our few

belongings in a few suitcases and haversacks on our backs. I rode on my bicycle in front and the rest of my family followed on foot. We joined the escaping Red Army, not knowing where we were going nor what to expect. The army was gunned down from every rooftop, house and direction and we, the civilians amongst them, were subjected to great peril. We decided that our proposed escape was too dangerous and senseless and subsequently returned home.

At that time we lived opposite the government bank. On our return we were told that the bank would be blown up the same day and it was not advisable to remain so close. As we stood, loaded with our belongings, we turned around and went to our aunty, who lived a few blocks away. We found the rest of our family congregated there: uncles, aunts and cousins. The partisans were not satisfied with their game so they continued their pointless and pitiless killing. The poor escaping soldiers tried to protect themselves from the flying bullets by holding their rifles over and against their heads. The streets were strewn with dead bodies.

From previous experiences, we knew that too many people concentrated in one place was very risky, so we each decided to return home and wait for what lay ahead.

As soon as the shooting outside ceased, my parents and Mira went home. I waited a while, to give them a little start, as I had my bicycle with me. the streets were deserted, except for the corpses all over the pavements. It looked like a battlefield. It was hard to imagine the same busy, vibrant, lively Kovno so dead in the middle of the day. I rode very quickly, as the stillness frightened me. Next to the Great Shul, a few blocks from home, a partisan suddenly appeared out of nowhere, grabbed me and demanded my bicycle. Being too slow to get off, he pushed me off the bike and ran away and I was left alone in the middle of the deserted street. I stood for a while and then started to run as fast as I could. Waiting for me at the gate was my darling Father with outstretched arms and fear written all over his face.

On Wednesday, the Germans occupied Lithuania and entered the city. We left the shelter and returned home. The partisans, still very restless and having a free hand to do anything they wished, caught Jews, old men, women and children, and pushed them into prisons and forts, some never to see the light again.

During the night of the 25th of June, they brutally murdered the Jews of Slabotka (a suburb of Kovno). It was dangerous to be seen in the streets. In one of the houses, they killed a whole family:

father, mother and son and displayed their heads on the sideboard. (The son was my schoolmate.) That night 800 Jews from Slabotka were slaughtered.

Being fair, I was not taken for a Jewess and could go to do the shopping without being recognised. In the bakeries, the salesladies used to look at the customers' faces and if they took you for a Jewess, you received an unwrapped, dry, stale black bread. I always came home with a fresh, white loaf. Despite all this, we sincerely hoped that all the happenings were temporary and that soon we would be able to continue our normal, carefree life.

As I have mentioned before, I was in the middle of my matric exams in the Lithuanian High School "Gymnasia". I still had two outstanding subjects to write: Darwinism and Russian History. A schoolmate of mine, a non-Jewish girl, also a nearby neighbour, used to call on me before the exams. She assured my parents that the streets were calm and that in her company, I was safe. On my arrival at school, all my schoolmates (non-Jewish), welcomed me with a great deal of friendliness. I went to the principal (a very liberal thinking man) and asked him if I should carry on with my exams. With a smile on his face he asked,

- "And why not?"

- "Because I'm a Jewess," I replied.

The expression on his face changed and his voice quivered from shock. He was at a loss for words. After a while he said that he would have to inquire at the education department. I waited outside the classroom for a while and when he returned he explained that I could still write but it would be recorded separately. He understood my feelings, so his advice to me was not to write and he would fill in my yearly marks. The bell rang and everybody entered the classroom.

I was the only Jewish pupil who arrived at school that day. The others remained in their homes out of fear.

While I was waiting for my friend, I looked out of the window and what I saw made me shudder. From the neighbouring courtyards, whole Jewish families, some mothers with babies in their arms, were being led by armed partisans to an unknown destination. I stood at the window, motionless, and watched helplessly with eyes filled with tears at our bitter fate.

When I returned home late in the afternoon, I decided not to leave again except for shopping.

Mira still carried on with her work at the chemist. Everyday she left for work accompanied by our Lithuanian maid, who also

used to fetch her at 3.00pm. On one occasion, the maid returned home alone, very distressed. She told us that Mira and a work-mate of hers had been taken to the Gestapo. We were very shocked and desperate, not knowing what to do next. We tried to use every available influence in begging for Mira's release, as we knew only too well what awaited them if they were to remain in the hands of the Gestapo leaders and their loyal Lithuanian helpers. I watched my dear parents with pain in my heart. Only a miracle could save the girls, and indeed a miracle occurred. Fortunately, humane folk are found even amongst the cruelest of mankind.

Mira and her friend came across one such man who took pity on them. At great danger to himself, he stealthily led them out of the fort from which anyone seldom came out alive. He sat them on his motorbike and returned them safely to their homes.

I have no words to describe our joy and happiness at seeing Mira again. Her rescuer did not go unrewarded.

After that, Mira too seldom left home. After a few weeks, the Jews experienced the first cruel humiliations that the Germans had in store for them. These were numerous. One of them was the wearing of the yellow star.

I remember the day so vividly. It was a Saturday, the Jews were not allowed to appear in the streets without the yellow star on the left lapel of their coats. The size had to be an 8 X 10cm square. Mira and I sat all day Thursday and sewed stars for all the family and friends.

On Saturday, the Jews walked out into the streets with uplifted heads, wearing the yellow star on their Shabbos clothes with great pride.

This angered our rulers, who changed their decree to demand that we wear a different star, this time on our backs. This still did not break our spirit. What did hurt us more was when they ordered us off the sidewalks and we were told to walk in single file in the gutters. How different were the glances of the people. Some followed us with jeers, some with expressions of sympathy (these even turned their heads away), and others with looks of triumph.

Again there was a new decree: all the Jews from the city had to leave their homes by the 15th of August and move to a new place, which had been prepared for them. They called it a "Ghetto". Our ghetto was destined to be in a part of Slabotka, a suburb of Kovno. Slabotka was famous for its big Yeshiva, where hundreds of young boys and men sat all day and learned Torah. (Even they could not

avoid their cruel destiny.) The section chosen for us consisted of a few dozen streets, all enclosed by a high barbed wire fence. Slabotka is situated between two rivers. Its connection with the city was a bridge, which could easily be blockaded.

Our dear parents and others went every day to look for a place into which to move. Each house they entered was deserted by its owners who had perished at the hands of the barbarians. On a kitchen wall in one of the homes, they found an inscription written with blood: "Through blood to revenge." The writer of those words was also one of the martyrs, who lost his life in the massacre.

Our new chosen home was one big room which we were going to share with another couple (Mira's work-mate and her husband).

The day had arrived and we had to leave our old home where we had spent such happy and peaceful years. The streets were filled with horses and carts and Jews moving their modest belongings to their new homes. We had to discard some of our possessions as we would not fit them all into our new living quarters. We had barely managed to unpack when a new decree was proclaimed: in two hours we were forced to leave this section again. It had to be vacated - Juden Frei. The Lithuanians wanted that section for themselves.

Again packing and unpacking. The question now was, where to go? It was hard to get transport. The peasants, who helped the Jews to move, were in a hurry to leave the Ghetto before the gates closed. The only solution was to carry all our belongings on our backs to our uncle's courtyard and later to find residing quarters. Bent under heavy burdens, my Mother, Mira and I hurried to reach our destination in time. As if this was not sufficient, a partisan stopped us, shoved brooms into our hands and ordered us to sweep the streets. The time was growing short and we became more and more worried. Pain filled the hearts of Mira and myself as we looked at our dear Mother with the broom in her hands, bent in sorrow and pain. I asked the partisan to let our Mother go and told him that Mira and I would finish the job on our own. He agreed and Mother went, though unwilling to leave us, to join our Father who was recuperating from a blow received earlier in the day from a rifle butt.

Mira and I completed our given task of sweeping the streets and then continued as fast as we could to move our belongings to our uncle's place. The only thing that remained to be transferred was a few metres of wood. A cold, hard winter loomed ahead of us and we knew how precious and useful the firewood would be. We had half an hour left in which to do this, but how? Our dear Father stood at the

gate, worried, with tears in his eyes, hoping to stop a cart. Suddenly, as if his prayer had been heard, a cart hurried by. The peasant pulled his reigns in and backed his cart to where my father stood. The driver, a Russian peasant, was ready to help us. Mira and I jumped into the cart and off we went. We loaded the last of our belongings, (the firewood), and sped back. We were very grateful to the peasant and offered him payment, however he refused to accept anything. He only asked my Father to allow me to go with him. If I had, maybe later I could have been of some help to my family, but I, of course, would not hear of it, and the peasant hurried off and out of the Ghetto, just as the gates were being locked.

Chapter 3

GHETTO

In the Ghetto we experienced a new chapter of sufferings, insults and exterminations. The year 1941 was the hardest. We had to readjust ourselves to the new conditions. Our only comfort was that we were all together with our dearest ones and hoped that our dear sister Sifa was also safe. We shared a small house that consisted of two tiny rooms and a small kitchen, with another family of four (they were very kind to accept us at the last moment) and here we started to live (if one can call it living). Every week, our new rulers had new surprises in store for us. A prominent figure in the Jewish community, Dr. Elkes, was appointed as the Eldest in Ghetto, and a Jewish Arbeitsamt was established. On the 18th of August, the so called "Akzia of the Intellectuals" took place. Young, intelligent men were ordered to come and help to organize the government archives. It sounded like a very innocent call, so five hundred and thirty-four volunteered and reported for duty. Not one of them returned or was ever heard of again.

The house searching period started on the 19th of August. All gold, silver or anything of value had to be delivered to the Germans. They did not spare human lives either, if they were in the mood. When the turn came for our district to be searched, we sent our darling Father to some friends until it would be over and safe to return. My dear Mother was very sad to give away all her wedding presents. Every piece of cutlery and jewelry was of sentimental value to her and she had wonderful memories of them. But at the same time she was sensible about it and knew that as long as human lives were untouched, material things did not matter. While the German soldiers packed all the valuables into big sacks, their leader, a Wehrmacht officer, asked me to show him my handbag. I handed it to him and waited in suspense, as inside I had a silver coin, a silver fountain pen, and my mother's silver medallion, and a few worthless articles. The officer looked through every article and anything he favoured he put into his pocket. When I saw him pulling out the silver medallion, in which I had placed Sifa's few photos which were very dear to me, I felt very sad and worried. He opened it and asked, "Who is this?" With a trembling voice, I told him that she was my sister and she was no longer alive. I could hardly keep myself from crying. He looked

around him, put the medallion into his hand and whispered into my ear, "Keep tight your sister." I could not believe my ears, but the medallion was in my hand and I promised myself to keep and cherish it whatever might happen. (In years to come it brought me much luck .)

On the 17th of September, a few streets were surrounded and the inhabitants were ordered to gather onto an empty square. Suddenly a car arrived and it was called off and everybody returned to their homes. The false alarm was only a prelude to the many real selections to come later.

The selection of the small Ghetto took place on the 4th of October. The small Ghetto was part of the big one. They were joined by a high bridge. In the beginning, the Ghetto hospital was situated there. The Gestapo spread a rumour that all the patients hospitalised there had infectious diseases, so they poured benzene over it, set it alight, and all the patients and medical personnel went up in flames. The Ghetto inmates who were forced to do this job were also shot. That day, about two thousand Jews were shot in the small Ghetto.

That's how we used to spend our days, in fear and agony. We were never sure what the next morning had in store for us.

Each morning, many Ghetto inmates used to gather at the Ghetto gates, hoping to be chosen for work in town. But not everyone was "blessed" with such luck. The Ghetto guards used all the weapons they had to disperse the remaining, hungry mob. The lucky ones were those who were favoured by the employers. But the working problem was settled after some time as each employer demanded the same people and the same number every day. This led to organised working brigades with a brigadier at its head.

Mira and I began our work at the local airport, as this brigade demanded the most workers. We had to build a new airport. Initially we started as volunteers and so we became part of the airport labourer force.

It was the toughest working brigade. The longest and hardest hours were in the nights when, for twelve consecutive hours, we had to stand knee deep in slimy ditches, digging or pushing wagons with stones, lime and sand. The guards did not spare us any kicks and curses.

The autumn and winter nights were unbearable. The cold wind, finding no barriers, battered our hungry bodies. The dry slice of bread we had brought from home became drier and harder from the cold. The guards used to gather around a fire to keep themselves warm but

The Ghetto gate (by Esther Lurie)

Airport Laborers (by Esther Lurie)

The bridge between the big and small ghetto

The Arbeitsamt (by Esther Lurie)

would not let us come near them even to warm up the piece of dry bread. Although at midnight we used to get some warm, watery soup, we watched the glowing fire with envy and tried to satisfy our hunger with the dry bread. When one is hungry, every crumb is welcome.

With sleepy eyes, we welcomed the morning suns' rays (if there were any), because with their appearance we would leave the empty airport once again. The only comfort was, on our return home, to find a warm meal and a comfortable bed which our dear Mother had so lovingly prepared for us.

On the 21st of October, on a very windy and cold night, while working night- shift, our dear uncle Benjomin (Chaim's father) lost his life at the airport. He was run over by an electric train. From then, the young Chaim, only twelve or thirteen years old, had to take his father's place in the family.

On the 27th of October, a new decree was proclaimed: all the Ghetto inmates, with no exception, had to appear the next day between five and six in the morning at the big "Democraten Square". My Mother and I were on our way to fetch a parcel that my friend had given us in exchange for a tablecloth. She met us at her gate with a big, fat goose (dead of course). We wrapped it in a cloth and returned home. The panic in the streets was great. People gathered round the Arbeitsamt to find out more about the new decree, but no one could give us an answer to our questions.

On our return, we hid the goose in the attic and my Mother started baking onion buns to take with us the next morning.

The night, of course, passed with no sleep. The early morning air was cold and the sky overcast. We dressed warmly, filling our pockets with the warm buns, and left our home with sad hearts, not knowing if we would return.

The streets were crowded. Everyone was moving in one direction. Nature was still engulfed in its deep sleep.

"Democraten Square" became crowded with the inmates, babies in prams, old people, sick people, some in wheelchairs: what a sight. The very ill ones were ordered to remain indoors and the houses were to be left open. They were not seen again.

The German Ghetto leaders arrived first, followed by the Lithuanian partisans and the Gestapo.

With the sunrise, the selection began. Some were ordered to the right, some to the left. The panic was growing. We did not know which queue to take. Which was safer? Slowly we began to realise what was happening. To the right was to life - here the Jewish Ghetto

police were taking over - and to the left was to death - here the partisans were the leaders. Those in the latter category were taken to the deserted small Ghetto for the night, and from there to their last destination.

Twelve hours after our arrival at the square, though very frightened and trembling, we were ready to go through the control gates where our fate would be decided. To make our darling Mother look younger, we had painted her cheeks with red paper, combed her gray hair in a youthful style and off we went. "To the right!" was the shout. "Faster! Faster!" a schoolmate of mine, then a Ghetto policeman made us hurry, saying that if we were to slow down they might change their minds. Behind us, my uncle Leon, aunty Yocheved and two cousins, Leale and Elinke, were also sent to the right. But Chaim, his sister and mother were ordered to the left. My Father would not rest. He begged my friend to intervene. The latter went up to the Gestapo leader and explained that my uncle had been killed a week ago while working at the airport. It seemed that the desired number of people had been reached so they let them go. We were happy to be together as a family again. Only then did we discover who were missing. In our family too, a void was left. My cousin, her husband and three year old baby and aunty (Nachum's mother, Fania, sister, Dora, and niece, Lala) were among the unlucky ones.

That night, 10,000 inmates were taken to the 9th Fort and throughout the night and the next day we could hear the echoes of machine guns.

In 1975, when we visited my darling sister Sifa in Vilna, we also visited the 9th Fort, where we saw, very vividly, the remaining bullet marks on the walls. Today it is a museum where people come, shed bitter tears and leave with aches in their hearts.

The 28th of October remains imprinted in everyone's minds and hearts for ever. Every family lost some of its nearest and dearest in the gruesome selection.

Ten thousand lives were wiped off the list of the living and life in the Ghetto continued. My Father got work in the Ghetto, my Mother managed the modest household and Mira and I continued with our work at the airport. The Jewish Arbeitsamt decided to reward, on their own initiative, the more diligent workers. Among the "lucky" ones were Mira and myself. Mira received two metres of firewood and I was sent to work for two weeks at a city brigade, "Entlasung" (Delousing department).

The new working place was physically much easier, but healthwise more dangerous. Here too I was "rewarded" for my work.

I contracted Typhus. The living conditions in Ghetto were very hard. We had hunger and cold in full measure. My illness had to be camouflaged under a false name. For firewood, we had already started to use the planks of our fences. It was quite pathetic. Amidst all this, a new decree was issued. They demanded a number of Jews to be sent to Riga (Latvia) to work. People were caught in the streets. The screams were bloodcurdling as families were separated. Parents were pulled away from children and sent to labour camps in Latvia.

Our next room neighbour had her twelve year old daughter in bed with flu, so she stayed away from work that day. A few German soldiers entered our small dwelling and asked my Mother why she was not at work. After producing a doctor's note stating that I had pneumonia and that she had to look after me, they left her alone and went into the other room. After a while they came out, taking our poor neighbour with them. Her daughter Dinale was screaming and begging for them to leave her mother but nothing helped. They told my mother to look after her too, and walked out. My Mother could not calm her down. Dinale cried and called for her mother.

A Wehrmacht officer passed by the house and, hearing the screams, entered and wanted to know the reason for the noise. My Mother explained to him. It seemed to touch his fatherly feeling as he told my Mother to dress Dinale and took her to look for her mother. She told us later that he had taken her to the old shul at the Ghetto gates where the captured inmates were gathered. He had picked her up and told her to call for her mother, but the latter was nowhere to be found. He then whispered into her ear, "Go home. Your mother has most probably escaped and will return home soon." He returned her home where my Mother looked after her until her brother and sister returned from work. In the middle of the night there was a knock at the door. Everybody jumped out of their beds, frightened from the previous day's shocking experience, and ran towards the door. From behind the door, which was covered with a curtain, came a soft whisper, "It's me, open." The officer had been right. Our neighbour had managed to escape and hide in a nearby attic. After it had quieted down, she had returned home. Mira too was hidden for twenty four hours in a dark cellar. She and a friend had to stand all through the night in a cellar under a bed as there was no sitting place.

After spending six weeks in bed with my life hanging by a thread and only thanks to my Mother's untiring nursing, I survived and was ready to return to work. Being immune to a future attack of Typhus now, I returned to work in Entlausung. There too, we experienced many inhumane acts.

Through this establishment, passed many Russian prisoners of war, German soldiers back from the front and the badly wounded who were on their way to the war hospital. There were also many young people who had been caught in the streets and sent to Germany for forced labour. Our work was to delouse their clothing in specially prepared ovens. If those caught were women, we had to shower and clean them. Very often, in winter, we took a nap on one of those wagons in the oven to keep ourselves warm. The German guards, in comparison to our previous ones, were relatively kind. They were all from the Wehrmacht and when alone, acted humanely towards the inmates. At night, when I lay on the hard bench and tried to sleep, I often felt someone quietly covering me with a blanket. From the corner of my eye, I could see a guard slinking away. The Russian P.O.Ws, after being deloused and after taking a hot shower, were given clean, deloused outfits. They remained seated at long tables to rest and wait for the others. It is sad to relate that they often collapsed from sheer exhaustion and were carried out dead.

To leave the establishment without a guard was forbidden. At the beginning, we brought home only logs of wood. This used to irritate the Lithuanian civilian population because they too suffered from a shortage of firewood. So we chopped the wood up into small pieces and carried it in our haversacks. Sometimes we even managed to conceal, between the wood, some fat that a peasant had sneaked in. Among other articles of food, they often sneaked in sacks of flour and eggs and left them in the boiler room. The inmates who worked there used to divide everything amongst everybody on the shift. It had to be done in great secrecy.

Such a transaction was once witnessed by a German guard and we were to be punished for it. On our return to the Ghetto in the evening, we were taken to the Ghetto jail.

While we were there, our fate had to be decided. The jail was in the shul, opposite the Ghetto gate. The women were led upstairs and the men remained downstairs. We did not realise the danger we were in, so we spent the night singing and joking. My dear Father brought me a flask of hot drink and something to eat. He looked very worried, but I did not suspect the reason to be the proclamation which hung over our heads. We were going to be taken to the 9th Fort - the place we knew so well as the place of no return. In the morning we were taken again to work and on our return, back to the jail to await the final report. For three days and nights our fate hung in the air. In Ghetto every possible attempt to

save us was applied and it eventually worked. We were freed and sent home, but were not allowed to return to the same working place. I was happy to be with my dearest ones again.

The Arbeitsamt sent everyone to new jobs. My new job was in the factory, "Guma", where we produced rubber boots, slippers and other rubber articles. (I became quite an expert.) A number of women stood on either side of the conveyer belt with heavy iron moulds in our hands. The work had to be done with terrific speed, as every day the given quota had to be produced and the belt ran without stop. The air in the hall was heavy and my arms ached from handling the heavy moulds. To drown away the monotony, the aches and the pains, we used to sing. Some of those songs still ring in my ears. In the evening, on my return to the Ghetto, I looked pale and felt exhausted.

Life in the Ghetto settled down for a while, but our dear Mother became very ill and the doctors ordered her to bed and to have complete rest. My dear Father managed to get a permit for Mira to stay home most of the time and look after Mother. To bring any food into the Ghetto from outside was very risky and dangerous. Many a time inmates were caught at the gate with some rice, sugar, fat or the like and were shot or hanged on the spot. Knowing that our dear Mother required fats to improve her health, we risked our lives several times and managed to bring some into the Ghetto.

On one occasion, I remember smuggling a single egg into the Ghetto, an egg which almost cost me my life. My darling Mother had made me a lovely, gray coat with a flare at the bottom, near the knees. On the inner lining, she had sewn a kitchen towel, which formed several pockets, perfect for smuggling. The egg, which I obtained from a source I cannot even remember, was tucked away in the pocket of my coat when I was stopped at the Ghetto gates after work one day and told to go with the other women into a little building beside the gate. There I was "frisked" by a female guard. As she ran her hands down my body, my breath stopped in my chest. Her hands had reached my lower thighs, directly above the offending egg when they suddenly changed direction and began their path upwards again. She looked satisfied that I had not broken any rules and I was allowed to leave. With a sigh of immense relief, I entered the Ghetto. Yet again, I thanked whomever or whatever appeared to be watching over me and marvelled at how I had once again escaped a near brush with death, as I would surely have been shot if I'd been discovered.

One morning, while I stayed home to look after Mother, I scrubbed the kitchen floor. My darling Mother pointed out to me

that under the kitchen dresser, there was a lot of dust. I lay on my stomach and stretched out my washing mop as far as it would reach. Suddenly, I touched something hard and pulled it out. I was shocked to find our silver sugar basin in my hand. I quickly hid it away and waited for my Father's arrival. Everybody had been warned that if anything of value was found, all the neighbours would be punished. (There were about nine or ten families in our courtyard.)

When everybody was asleep, my Father came out into the courtyard and threw the sugar basin into the well. Our well served all our neighbouring courtyards, so there were always people with buckets around, waiting for their turn. The summer and autumn passed without any incident. One autumn day, a few Jewish firemen, accompanied by German soldiers, were instructed to lower a long stepladder into the well to check for hidden valuables. (They still were not satisfied with their lot ...) We all stood around with a prayer on our lips. It was answered. They firemen came up empty handed.

A cold winter arrived. The drops of water around the well turned to ice and it was quite dangerous to draw water. My darling Father was always at hand to help the elderly women. I watched through the glass kitchen door and waited for my Father's return. One cold, winter day, as usual, my Father came out to help the women and to fetch water for ourselves. I stood at the glass door and watched. After the women had left, Daddy dropped the bucket into the well. When lifting it out, he noticed that the water inside was very dirty so he poured the water out. What a shock he got when, with the dirty water, came the silver sugar basin. It sounds a little far fetched, so it seemed to us too, but it happened just like that. My Father grabbed the basin before anyone could notice it and ran into the house. In the night, when all were asleep, Daddy, Mira and I came out with knives and spoons and started to dig a hole under our window. It was not an easy task as the ground was frozen and covered with snow. It took us some time but we managed to bury the basin in the frozen ground. It was quite an experience.

The year 1942 also held very hard times for us, although it did not carry the threat of mass murder. The saddest time for us was when we lost our darling cousin, Leale, who died of pneumonia. She was only nineteen years old and in full bloom. We had to keep the tragic news from our darling Mother. It was not easy. Her passing left such a void in our lives.

Meanwhile, different organisations sprung up on the scene. These included political groups, cultural circles, schools for young

children and trade schools for older ones and a very successful orchestra. It is very hard to believe that people subjected to such sufferings and always under such strain could gather, knowing that such activities were dangerous, and appreciate any kind of art for art's sake. However, the Jewish heart is blessed with always having Emunah (hope) and in the worst and most critical times of life we never lost our courage.

Our darling Mother was making very good progress in her health. The doctors were very satisfied and praised us, saying that it was due to our nursing and care that she had improved. It was lovely to see her on her feet and around the house again. In the evenings, the neighbours used to gather in the courtyard and each of them used to tell some stories that they remembered from the First World War. My darling Father, with his wonderful sense of humour, used to tell little funny episodes and jokes from his work in the woods and made everybody laugh. We enjoyed the stories and forgot about the worries and the uncertainties of tomorrow, if only for a short while.

My friend Pnina, who was married and had a little daughter, Gitale, also lived in the Ghetto with her family. In my free time, I used to run to her and together we used to sit and remember those wonderful and carefree days of our lost and interrupted youth. Her husband, then a Ghetto policeman, brought in secretly with a few other policemen, a cart-load of flour to sell in the Ghetto. The Lithuanian guard caught them and sent them to the 9th Fort. Everybody was shocked, as all sorrows as well as pleasures were shared by all. The whole week I worked till late at night and I looked forward to Saturday which I would spend with my dear friend. On Saturday morning, I put on my best dress and before leaving, I went to the neighbours to fetch the meager, weekly food ration. While I waited for it to be weighed, I overheard that the families of those captured policemen had been gathered together and shot with their husbands and fathers the night before. Hearing this, I fainted and was carried into our room, where my darling Mother, shocked from the news, brought me back. My poor, dear friend left us, taking with her a secret which she had hoped to disclose to me that day.

At work, two friends of mine and I decided to leave our jobs and ask the Arbeitsamt for an easier one. But our employers demanded their three women workers back. Not having our names, they sent a letter to the Jewish Arbeitsamt with these words: Send us back the Black Devil (Fania Gaitlband), the Fat One (Rochalle Levin) and the Pale Angel (yours truly). It sounds funny and unbelievable, but we were

found and returned, albeit against our will, to our old job. After a few weeks, I got an inflammation of the joints and was discharged on doctor's orders. When I recovered, I was sent to different jobs. These included working at a brush factory, scrubbing floors, chopping wood and many other similar tasks.

After a few months, I received permanent employment weeding large vegetable patches on a large farm. It was quite far from the Ghetto. To reach the fields, we had to walk a long distance, cross the river by a small boat and then again walk a few miles. The whole day we stood, bent under the hot sun, weeding. Our backs ached when we tried to straighten up. The only blessing was that at the end of the day, we managed to pack and bring home haversacks filled with all kinds of vegetables, though very often they were taken away from us on our return to the Ghetto.

This alone gave me courage and strength, knowing that my dear Mother would prepare something good for us to eat. Nothing was wasted. Even the leaves were used to make different and tasty dishes. I can still taste the mock chopped liver my Mother made from beetroot leaves, even the kneidlach from the frozen, stinking potatoes tasted delicious.

I remember a funny incident. One day, while everybody was out delivering furs to the Arbeitsamt, I remained home, waiting for our neighbour's son Hershel, to return from work to give him lunch. In the morning, my Mother baked kneidlach from a batch of rotten, stinking potatoes. Even after washing them for days, the smell was still strong and no one would eat them. They remained in the oven. Hershel arrived from work, starved as a wolf. He had a wash and we sat down to a "lovely", stinking meal. We blocked our noses and finished all the kneidlach. When everybody returned we all had a good laugh and completely forgot the strenuous day. So we used to try and make fun of everything around us.

My dear Father suffered another gallstone attack. It was during the night and we felt helpless, as only an injection could help. Mira and I were prepared to risk our lives to go and fetch a sister to come and give Daddy an injection. But who should go? So we decided to both go. We held on to each other and went out in the dark night to fetch help for our dear Father. In the stillness of the night we could hear only our heartbeats and the sounds of the heavy boots of the guards in the distance. We knew very well what awaited us if we were caught, so holding our breath, we walked on. The sharp stones of the pavement hurt our bare feet but we ignored it. The sister, Liza,

Remains of the burnt out hospital (by Esther Lurie)

The Jewish orchestra in Ghetto

our only hope, would not hear of returning with us. She knew too well the risk we were taking. We cried and begged, assuring her that we would protect her, (new heroes, how naive.) Eventually, after much crying, she agreed to accompany us. She threw a gun over her shoulders and the three of us went out in the quiet, black night. Only when our dear Father fell peacefully asleep did we realise what a risk we had taken and were very grateful to the wonderful Sister Liza. We would not let her go home until the next morning. All three of us slept in one bed.

There was little sunshine in our lives during the year 1942. With the onset of 1943, the Germans received great blows on the front. We felt every mood of theirs in our bones. Many started to build shelters to hide in (Malines) when the time came, to await the end. According to everybody's calculations, the end was very near, but we doubted whether many of us would live to see it.

The 26th of October, 1943, was an ordinary day in Ghetto. Mira and I were getting ready to go to work. Suddenly we realised that something was wrong in Ghetto. The news reached us that the Ghetto was closed up and no one was allowed to leave. We knew, from previous experience, that this was a very bad sign. Again a selection. Again people were gathered to be sent to different labour camps. The panic was rising. Some ran into hiding in previously prepared shelters and others remained waiting and praying. We were amongst the latter ones. Through the slits in the remaining planks of our gate, we could see Jews, with parcels on their backs, accompanied by Lithuanian partisans, being led towards the Ghetto gates. Each time they passed our gate, we prayed that we would be spared. It was only wishful thinking. A Jewish policeman and two partisans appeared and ordered us to get ready for our unknown journey. The fact that whole families, and even some of their belongings, were allowed to be taken, lulled our fears. The explanation given to us was that we were needed for some easy work and that no harm would come to us. Again we believed them. After all, we had no option. We left our unfinished lunch on the table, took leave from our crying neighbours, family and friends, and left under heavy guard, towards the Ghetto gate, where many inmates were already gathered. We joined our Uncle Leon, Aunty Yochevet, and Cousin Elinke, and were happy to be together with some of the family.

Lorries arrived and we were loaded onto them and driven out of the Ghetto. The fresh, clean air and the birds singing made us, the young ones, forget our uncertainties and we began to sing. But

our good spirits were disturbed when we arrived at the airport and saw what awaited us. The airport was full of SS guards and partisans. When we saw the gruesome skulls on their hats, the emblem of the SS, our hearts sank. A long row of carriages, like a snake, was ready to swallow us inside. With extraordinary speed, the started to separate us. Men to one side, women to another. The elderly women and children were loaded onto lorries and taken to the first carriages of the train, which we heard later, were taken in another direction, to the gas chambers of Aushwitz, Treblinka and other extermination camps.

It was heartbreaking to watch babies snatched from their mother's arms and thrown into the waiting lorries. The screams and cries of the poor mothers and children were indescribable. They wanted to jump into the lorries to join their children, but were pushed off with rifle butts and left lying on the ground.

My dearest Mother and darling Aunty Yochevet were taken to the lorries with the children and we never saw them again. My Father was pulled away to another carriage and suddenly Mira and I were left alone, frightened and confused from the sudden happenings. We held each other tightly and did not feel the heavy blows and punches we received from the partisan who wanted to separate us. He did not succeed (where did we get the strength?). To satisfy his burning anger and disappointment, he grabbed my watch and ran off with it.

When their aim was achieved, they pushed one hundred people into a cattle wagon, locked the doors behind us and we moved off. During the first days of our "luxurious" journey, we hardly noticed the conditions we were in. Each of us was heartbroken at the separation. Gone were our dearest ones, and who knew if we would ever see them again? The cries and screams slowly died down. We were exhausted. The only light and little air in the trucks came from tiny windows in the top which were too high for us to reach. Our lips were dry from thirst and from crying. The air in the wagon became heavier and more pungent. We relieved ourselves where we lay as no facilities were given. It is hard to describe the inhumane conditions we had to endure.

From time to time the iron door was opened and the guards pushed in a few cases with "sinalko" water. The smell was unbearable. But the will to live and survive was growing stronger. We blocked our noses and poured the stinking water down our dry throats.

In the morning, warm sun-rays poured into the truck and warmed our bodies and minds. New hope filled our hearts. Maybe

we would still meet our beloved ones and would be able to live in peace again, after all. We lay on the hard, dirty floors next to one another. Although we were unable to sleep, we still dreamt of a happy tomorrow.

After four days of travelling in those conditions, we arrived in Estonia, one of the three Baltic countries. The heavy doors were opened and we were ordered with cursing words to jump out and leave everything behind. We just managed to straighten ourselves and again an order was given to stand in rows of five. We were counted over and over again. The whole place was surrounded by armed soldiers. We were ordered to deliver all our valuables. Mira's and my only "fortune" was 1500 Marks each which our darling Mother had handed to us before we left the Ghetto. I had also managed to hide my Mother's five golden teeth and the silver medallion. I was determined to save at least the money and the medallion, the former being of material importance and the latter of sentimental value.

I would not tell Mira about it as she would have worried on my behalf. Mira buried her money, and I the golden teeth, in the sand under our feet. But the rest I succeeded in hiding in the private parts of my body. I knew I was taking a tremendous risk. In the later months, the money came to good use as it made it possible for us to help our dear Father. And as for the medallion, it could have told quite a story if it could only have spoken.

From where we stood, we saw a number of inmates being pushed again into the train and among them we saw our dear Father's pale and tired face. He looked at us with sadness in his eyes and then climbed into the carriage. The doors closed and the train moved away and disappeared.

Mira and I stood glued to the ground, helpless. There were no tears left in our eyes. The remaining inmates were counted again and then, under strong guard, we were brought to the labour camp in Estonia-Vaivara.

Chapter 4

VAIVARA

The camp had many long barracks, surrounded by high barbed wire fences. In each corner of the camp, there stood watch-towers from where the soldiers observed the camp. It was not easy to escape as the fence was electrified. Many barracks were occupied by inmates from Vilna Ghetto. We were placed one hundred women to a barrack. Each of us received two thin, gray blankets and a narrow space on the hard wooden bunk. The only light in the barrack was from a few carbide lamps which gave us terrible headaches for the first few nights. The nights passed with no sleep. All the gruesome pictures from the previous days were still very vivid in our minds. The next morning all the arrivals were assembled, their heads were shaven, they were given new numbers and were sent to different jobs. In the beginning, I was appointed to work in the camp. I was responsible for one large room in the barrack. My title was Stuben Alteste (Room Eldest).

While the inmates of the room were at work, I had to clean and scrub the room and bunks. On their return, I had to distribute the meager ration evenly. Physically, my job was much easier but the fear of working within the view of the Lagerfuhrer and other German guards made me ask for a transfer to work outside the camp. We were sent to the station to load two-metre logs onto wagons. It was very hard work. It was cold and wet outside and on our return to the camp after a hard day's work, the tired women started to fight among themselves for a place in front of a small, iron oven, trying to dry their wet shoes and clothes. We slept with the shoes under our heads to prevent them from being stolen. Our daily rations were very meager, consisting of:

Breakfast:	Some thin, watery soup or a cup of boiled, bitter tea leaves.
Lunch:	The same.
Dinner:	A loaf of bread between five inmates (sometimes four), five grams of margarine and again the bitter tea.

From this we were required to draw strength and vigour for work. Water to wash ourselves was very scarce so the bitter tea came in very handy.

In one of the barracks, we found a few children from Vilna. This awakened in the mothers amongst us a hope that their children were alive too and that some women, like us, were taking care of them.

Here, too, some terrible experiences awaited us. During the first week of our arrival, our new employers prepared for us a cruel demonstration, an example of a new punishment. One of the women had smuggled an egg and a small can of milk into the camp for her sick child. At the same time, two men were caught at the gate for a similar crime. All three were sentenced to twenty-five strokes. On our return to the camp, after a very hard and exhausting day, we were ordered to assemble together onto an empty space which was lit by a few carbide lamps. In the middle of the assembly stood a specially prepared table and everybody was ordered to remain and watch the cruel spectacle.

The three condemned were brought in. The screams or the two men tore our hearts. Each stroke cut deep into their flesh. I stood with my hands covering my face, trembling. After a while the two men were carried out, barely conscious, into their barracks. The poor woman did not utter a single sound. After each stroke, we could hear outcries from the onlookers. We carried her limp body into the barrack and laid her gently onto the hard bunk. She said softly, with a trembling voice, that she was prepared to repeat this crime for the sake of her sick child. A real example of a Yiddishe Mamme. She had refrained from crying out, not wanting to give the Germans the satisfaction.

The next morning, the three were sent to the hardest manual work. So passed our days, in suspense and tension.

Mira, being a pharmacist, was employed in the camp dispensary, which was about one hundred metres away from camp. After trying hard, she succeeded in getting me into the dispensary as a cleaning woman. At the beginning, my job was to wash bottles, scrub floors, dust and other similar tasks.

Early in the morning, we went out to our job, accompanied by German guards. After ten hours work, we used to return to camp. Our job was much easier than at the station and we were away from the stern looks of the Lagerfuhrer and the rest of the camp overseers.

We had scarcely worked there a few weeks, when a Typhus epidemic spread through the camp. The camp was cut off from the outside and no one was allowed to go out to their work. Mira and I were immune to Typhus, having had it previously. Mira had it after the First World War and I, in the Ghetto. This allowed us to join the medical personnel. Here began for us a new epoch. We worked

with a wonderful band of men and women and learned much from them, and I will always remember this period in my life.

A new, strong will to live was born in me and my only wish and aim was to help the sick, who needed help badly. The medical personnel was moved to another barrack. If we were needed, it was easy to trace us. The women personnel had to share the barrack with the men as well as the camp personnel. It was not very convenient, but we had no say in it, so we made the best of it. In the evenings, we often used to sit around the long table, share our daily experiences, sing and joke. The medical personnel became one big family.

Our camp became the centre for all the Typhus patients. They were brought from all the neighbouring camps to us. As soon as it was heard that a lorry full of sick inmates was arriving, Mira, the other nurses and I stood, heads bent and ready to accept and carry on our backs each and every arrival into the barracks and place them onto the hard bunks. How sad it was.

One day, while I was carrying a sick inmate on my back (he was light as a child) he called me by my name. When he saw the bewildered look in my eyes, he explained that, in days gone by, he had visited my elder sister and played with me, and now here, I was carrying him on my back. He no longer was the vital person he must have been in former years. I carried him into the dimly lit room and laid him on the hard bunk. As the stale, lingering whiff of burned carbide filled the room, he spoke of happier times, when he had been welcomed into our home by my dear parents. As hard as I tried I could not recognise or reconcile this pathetic figure of a man, with that of a person who had visited us. Suddenly he asked me to do him a favour. He told me that, in the lorry which had brought him, there was a small suitcase. He asked me to retrieve it, as he kept there something that belonged to his wife. I searched the lorry and eventually found the suitcase. It was a challenge to get it past the guards, who had been ordered to burn everything they found inside the lorry after the inmates were removed. I placed it on my back and, in carrying another inmate into the barrack, I was able to hand it to my friend. He opened it in front of me and took out only one stocking and a bra that had belonged to his wife. Although I ran the risk of bodily harm, the look in his eyes was sufficient reward for my act. Many years later, when I was reconciled with my darling sister Sifa, in Russia, I met this man, now restored to health, and once again I failed to recognise him because he was strong and strapping. I remarked that now I would not be able to carry him on my back.

After a day's work, our overalls were covered with lice. The pitiful faces of the sick inmates was hard to take. From every bunk one could hear weak outcries of, "Sister. Water. Water..." and with these words, some were silenced forever. Many died in my arms, leaving me covered with lice. Everybody was so lonely and heartbroken. The conditions were hard and there was no shoulder to cry on.

The fever hospital was enclosed by a barbed wire fence and the camp inmates and some of the medical personnel were forbidden from entering that enclosure. The epidemic spread and the sick bay was filling up rapidly. Here too we experienced very sad and heartbreaking moments. Mira and I remained working in the sick bay outside the fever hospital. To enter the fever section was prohibited for us too, but this did not deter me from securing the much needed food from a friend in the kitchen, for more hungry patients who were recovering in the hospital.

On one occasion, I was retreating from one of the wards after visiting my sick friends, when the Kommandant caught me red handed. All he asked was where I worked and for whom. Our dear doctor, Dr. Finkelstein from Kovno, was held responsible for my deed, and received twenty-five strokes. I felt very guilty, and when I approached him with an apology and promised not to do it again, he smiled and said that if I found it necessary I could repeat it. I continued my illegal visits but was more careful, so, often I'd return crawling under the barbed wire fencing, scratched and bleeding, my clothes torn. I was oblivious to pain and only sustained the fear of being caught again.

I would like to mention a few doctors by name. They did so much with so little at their disposal. As I mentioned before, our head doctor was Dr. Finkelstein, a very gentle man. He suffered a lot with every sick inmate. I remember one instance. It was during the epidemic. The women of the camp were led to the bath. Every hair on our bodies was shaved off and we had to pass, naked, in front of the German leaders who were seated near the door, holding torches in their hands. Each of us was inspected thoroughly to make sure that the job was done properly. They smirked and laughed. Dr. F was ordered to watch this dirty game of theirs. He stood with his head bent, ashamed and brokenhearted. The Germans were so busy and engrossed in their job, that they did not notice Dr. F slinking away, out through the door. After we dressed, we had to wait for the barracks to open, as they had been fumigated the whole day. Only then did we notice that Dr. F. was not amongst us. Our beloved Dr. Kamber went to look for him and found him lying on the sofa in the sick bay.

He had tried to take an overdose of sleeping pills but was revived and returned to join us. Dr. Kamber, a paediatrician, also from Kovno, was a rare personality. She had been my doctor when I was small. It is hard to describe the love and devotion she showered on the few surviving children. She was always ready to sacrifice herself for them and watched over them like a good angel. She saved many children with her loving care.

Another doctor, Dr. K., a surgeon from Vilna, had a degree from a music school, and after a hard day's work, he used to warm our hearts with his violin playing. He managed to hide this instrument only for a short time. He appointed me to help him with operations, which he used to perform very successfully. Very often, when I stood at his side in the dimly lit room and watched how the rusty scalpel moved between his fingers, I wondered whether the patient would survive and be able to see the light again. To my, and everyone's surprise, the results were wonderful.

Dr. Antakoletz, a doctor from Vilna, was a very intelligent and warmhearted man. We all adored him and spent much of our time in his company. He was the first amongst the personnel to contract Typhus. Mira and I looked after him. In the later camps, he secretly organised a dramatic society. In the evenings, the inmates used to gather for rehearsals. Mira and I were already in another camp, but he used to smuggle some letters to us, addressed to his "sisters". He later became very depressed with the situation and tried to escape from the camp with a few inmates. They were caught and shot in a nearby forest.

Dr. Kascenevsky, also from Vilna, was an eye specialist His sense of humour was well known in the camp. One had only to look at him and all one's worries and sorrows disappeared. In addition, he had a heart of gold. On our visits to Russia in later years, I visited him. Unfortunately he was not too well but his old spirit was there. I met his wife and children, all professionals. After the war, he changed his specialty and became a psychiatrist. This is a short account of our dear friends whom we honoured and loved.

It was 1943. The Germans suffered great losses at the front. The Russians were advancing with giant steps. All camps near the Russian border were liquidated. In our camp also, the same restlessness prevailed. All the important offices were evacuated and the pharmacy went with them. Mira and I were appointed to go with. It was very hard and sad to take leave of our dear friends whom we loved and had gotten to know so well during the three hard months together in Vaivara.

On the way to Estonia.
On the right my dear father Leiba (wearing hat and back satchel) and cousin Elinka (facing the camera)

Dr Finkelstein & Dr Kamber. (From the book "Lite")

The train that had to take us to our new "home" stood a whole day in the station. We got to know that the camp in which our dear Father was stationed was on its way to Vaivara. Mira and I stood glued to the window and hoped to get a glimpse of him. Suddenly we saw Russian planes above us. We were only too happy to see them as only they could hinder our departure. It was fun to watch the German guards. They dispersed like frightened rabbits and ran for their lives. They had to survive, it seemed, as there was so much they still had in store for humanity. Unfortunately for us the alarm did not last long and in the afternoon we departed for an unknown destination without seeing our darling Father. We were the only two civilians in the train full of German soldiers. Our Obersharfuhrer, a real "Hitler" man, arrived and gave us strict instructions and warned us not to open the outside door if anyone should knock, and not to switch on any light outside in case the train was spotted by Russian planes. Mira and I were lying on the hard floor, hugging each other to keep warm and trying to sleep, when we heard a loud banging on the outside door. We got up and ran, as instructed, through the long passage to call for help. From the opposite direction, somebody was running towards us with a torch lighting our faces. It was the Obersharfuhrer. He patted us on our shoulders, very pleased with himself, and praised us for our obedience. We stood looking at each other, not knowing what he meant. In one breath, he told us what had happened. Someone had left the outside light on while the train had stopped at a station, and that meant sabotage. He himself was knocking at the door, wanting to test us. Not receiving an answer, he was very happy and did not even suspect us of the big "crime". The night passed with no sleep. We were seated amongst all the boxes with the ointments. We did not even have toilet facilities and had to resort to emptying out the jars and using these containers and then throwing the contents out of the window. We used to laugh ourselves sick. There were times when we feared for our safety. We were very lucky we were not molested. Food was brought to us and the guard, quite a humane type of fellow, placed a clean bucket with water in our compartment with strict instructions to drink only the water provided. He told us that he had a daughter the same age as myself and wondered whether he would ever see her again. One of the human encounters we had.

After a few days of travelling, we reached our destination, a new camp called Kivioli.

Chapter 5

KIVIOLI

Here we found more Jews from Vilna. The camp was smaller than our previous one, the conditions slightly better and the Lagerfuhrer a little gentler. This was reflected on the faces of the inmates. At the beginning, the inmates looked at us very suspiciously. They could not understand how we could have been chosen from so many and brought to the camp. They thought that we were working with the Germans but after some time, they saw how foolish their suspicion had been. We were one of them and they welcomed us with open arms. Here too, we joined the medical personnel, and here too, we found wonderful friends who made our suffering easier.

Kivioli was famous for its oil and coal mines. A large number of the camp's male inmates were occupied there, the others worked in the camp, on roads, fields and other places. The camp hospital, quite small then, was about one hundred metres away from camp, next to a high coal dump, which glowed in the night from the burning coal. The Germans found it easy to dispose of the bodies of the people they killed by pushing them into the mountain and ensuring that they were completely covered by ashes.

In the beginning, Mira and I worked in the camp dispensary, which was managed by a lovely, beautiful, twenty-one year old Russian girl, Nina, from Narva. She was caught for work with other girls, but because of her beauty and youth, she was forced to join the S.S. and was given a secure and safe job at the H.Q. She became like a sister to us, very sincere and kindhearted.

My work consisted of the following: cleaning Nina's room at 7 am, bringing water for the day and then joining Mira in the dispensary to carry on the work there, dusting, cleaning and helping Mira to prepare the monthly distributions of medicine for all the neighbouring camps. Once a month, lorries would arrive and fetch them. We shared a room with another four girls, who worked in the camp. As I have mentioned before, the conditions in which we lived were a little better.

Our toilets were situated in a nearby barrack. It was a row with holes and here we had to relieve ourselves in front of each other, (very convenient).

Once, while I was sitting on one of those holes, doing my business, I noticed a girl whom I had not seen before in the camp, sitting next to me on another hole. So we started a conversation. She

told me that she, too, was sent here from another camp, called Ereda. I got very excited, as our dear Father was there. We managed to help him, somehow, with our ration. I asked her if she knew my Father and when I told her his name, she burst out laughing. She said that before her departure, my Father had come to her, (he got to know that she was being transferred to Kivioli), and asked her to find us and give us his love. She asked him what our names were, and his reply was, "The best daughters you will meet, are mine, and you will find them easily." Many years later, she visited South Africa and the first thing she mentioned at our reunion, was our father's remark. We had a good laugh with tears in our eyes.

Amongst all my friends, I found one special one. His name was Josif, a dental mechanic from Vilna. He was sincere, honest and kind, and gave much meaning to my sorrowful and lonely existence. He was always at hand when we needed him.

Mira became ill. She developed carbuncles from malnutrition and was laid up in hospital for some time. Josif managed to get her an egg every day, and sometimes a small piece of meat, though it involved great risk. Believe me, it meant a great deal in those days and I never discovered how he did it. Before I took the provisions to Mira, he made sure that I ate some of them, as he knew too well that I'd keep everything for Mira.

Our dear doctors did a lot for their patients. They assured me that milk injections would help Mira. As soon as Josif heard this, he arrived the next day with a small jug of milk (don't ask me where he got it from). I boiled it in a little can on a small plate under the bed (it had to be done in secrecy). It helped and Mira improved a lot, but had to remain in hospital as she was very weak and still in pain. I used to lie on my bunk and pray for her recovery. We were very blessed having each other.

One night, while lying on my bunk and trying to sleep, we heard an explosion. The windows shattered. We remained in the room because it was forbidden to get out at this time of night. Suddenly, we heard another bang, but this time it was the men from the other side of the wall pushing down the wall in order to be near us and to protect us. Amongst them was Josif. They told us that the bomb was aimed into the coal dump but fell not far from the hospital. On hearing that, I fainted, knowing that Mira was still there. After I came to, Josif assured me the Mira was safe and the rest of the patients were too.

In the early hours of the morning, before anyone was up, Josif already had a bottle of milk for Mira and he was the first to bring us regards from the hospital, that everyone was fine, though a little

shaken. Only thanks to Dr. Wainrib's and sister Adinka's quick thinking, the danger was averted and everyone was saved.

I would also like to mention a very kind and brave Yugoslav orderly, who was very humane and warm to the suffering inmates. In Vaivara, too, during the epidemic, he proved to be very sincere and levelheaded. He treated the patients with so much gentleness and suffered with us. He was especially kind to Mira and myself (we were very lucky in that respect.) Here I should mention an episode that will remain in my memory forever.

It was Erev Pesach. Mira was still in the hospital and I was all alone and very busy in the dispensary, preparing the monthly orders for the neighbouring camps. They were due to fetch the supplies that same day. I was working and my thoughts were far away, in my old home, among my beloved ones. Everybody was in the Yom-Tov spirit. The sweet smell of my Mother's Yom-Tov dishes reached me and my eyes filled with tears. My sweet memories were suddenly interrupted by the entry of the Yugoslav, and my stream of thought was broken. He had come from one of the camps to fetch the supplies. He came up to me and whispered into my ear, "Hajale, come with me, I brought you a present for Easter." Knowing how honest and gentle he was, I followed him outside. What a pleasant surprise I had, when I stood face to face with my darling Father, whom I had not seen since we were separated four or five months previously. We stood for a while and could not utter a word and then I ran to him, hugged and snuggled up to him, as I had done as a child. Our bodies trembled with emotion. With the Yugoslav's permission, I took Daddy to the sick bay to relax and gave him something warm to drink. He was looking for Mira. I tried to convince him that Mira was improving in hospital, but nothing would satisfy him. He was sure that she was not alive. Dr. Wolkowisky, then our head doctor, went to the hospital and asked Mira what she would do if she heard that her Father was in camp. Mira was weak and short tempered and asked the doctor not to pull her leg, but the doctor continued to ask the same question, waiting for a reply. At last Mira told him that she would crawl on all fours to see him, if it were true. So the doctor told her to get dressed and he practically carried her in his arms and brought her to the camp to see Daddy. Only then was our darling Father satisfied. He was the happiest man when he had both his children with him, even for a short time. The medical personnel stood and watched us with tears in their eyes. We were very thankful to the Yugoslav for the few happy hours he gave us. I managed to get a few changes of underwear and

some food for Daddy, and when we had to say goodbye, it was with a broken heart and tear-filled eyes. I led him to the waiting lorry and tried as hard as I could to control myself. As soon as the lorry moved away and was out of sight, I ran back to the barrack where Mira was lying, weak and in great pain. We lay for hours, hugging each other and crying.

Mira returned to the hospital and I, to my work. Very often, I would wonder how long our nerves could last. From time to time, a few inmates would try to escape from the camp, but did not succeed. They were caught and shot and the whole camp would have to undergo inhumane punishments.

In the meantime, a new hospital was built in the camp, with new rooms for the personnel. Mira improved and we continued our work as nurses and in the pharmacy. There were four of us nursing sisters. Each of us was responsible for a few wards. There was never a shortage of patients, so we were occupied the whole day. Our working day started at 5 am. When the patients were still fast asleep, we used to go with pails to fetch water from a nearby well (accompanied, of course, by armed guards). In the summer, it was not too bad, but in the winter, when the water around the well used to freeze, it became very slippery. Our hands would stick to the frozen handles of the well and it was hard to pull them free. It used to make us cry out in pain. Every drop of water was extremely precious, so for our personal use, we used the clear, white snow.

One morning, when I stood, half naked, washing myself with the snow, the commandant entered the room with some visitors for an inspection. I was very embarrassed and reached for my towel, covered myself and delivered the full report, as we were instructed to do. I was very surprised when he patted me on the shoulder and said, "This is very good, that the inmates keep themselves clean." They were afraid of another Typhus epidemic. We used to hang our blankets on the wire fence every morning to air them. In the evening they were frozen. We had to straighten them out which made a sound like breaking wood. As I mentioned before, at 5 am, we used to fetch water for the whole day. I then went to clean Nina's room and the dispensary and, following this, returned to the hospital where I spent a whole day washing my patients, distributing their meager rations and completing other duties. Each patient was very dear to us. They crowned me with the name, "Sister Chajale". I heard that name called from every corner of the ward. Among the patients, there was a lovely boy, Elinke, a ten year old from Vilna. He was very lonely and homesick. I spent a lot of time with him. After a day's work, I

would sit on his bunk and tell him stories which my Mother had told me when I was a child. Our eyes would fill with tears. He would squeeze and kiss my hand, and with my hand in his, he would fall asleep. I loved him dearly.

Our doctors, with Dr. Wolkowisky at the head, did their best for the patients, sometimes more than they would in normal times, considering the difficult conditions. They never gave up and applied all kinds of remedies. The results were remarkable.

To bear children in the camp was forbidden. We had quite a number of pregnancies, but here too, the doctors showed wonderful skill and did their work in secrecy without the Germans knowing a thing. They performed abortions during the night, when the Germans were asleep and the next morning, it was as if nothing had happened.

Of these pregnancies, the Germans permitted two to reach full term because the women were already pregnant when they entered the camp. One of these women was a young Russian Jewess, who had arrived only recently with the Hungarian transport and who was not yet acquainted with the camp life. She had married a short time before the war broke out. She was young and very naive. The second was a girl from Kovno. A very fine, gentle person. Her lover was a former schoolmate of hers, a very intelligent young man. With times as uncertain as they were, her condition was to be pitied. She was in camp with her mother, a lovely, understanding person, who accepted this situation very bravely and with much courage.

The two pregnancies were allowed to follow their course and the Germans ordered that they had to be present at the births. To them, it was a sort of entertainment.

A room was prepared for the two expectant mothers and I was appointed their nursing sister.

The Russian mother went into labour at night. Mira was on duty, when the labour started (all the nurses took turns for two hours each). The doctor had to be called, but before the Germans could be informed, the baby was born dead. The young mother was very heartbroken. She hoped, as every mother does, to hold her baby in her arms. At first, she blamed Mira for being too slow in calling the doctor. The poor girl did not realise how much sorrow she had avoided, as the Germans had given instructions that every child born in camp must be killed.

The second birth took place according to the "regulations". The Germans arrived. Their faces were glowing with happiness.

The young mother was lying on the table with fists clenched from pain. She buried her nails into Mira's hand rather than cry out in pain. She would not give the Germans the satisfaction.

Dr. Yudin, our gynaecologist, stood bent, his forehead covered with perspiration. In normal times, it would have been a pleasure for him to bring a new baby into the world, but here, knowing the baby's fate, he stood with agony written all over his face. I was busy boiling the instruments and hardly knew what to expect. Suddenly, a baby's cry was heard. What a wonderful sound, but then and there it was silenced as the baby was placed into a bath of cold water which had been prepared for this purpose. Dr. Yudin ran out of the room crying, followed by another doctor who just managed to pull the bottle of poison out of his hand in time. (By the way, some time later, Dr. Yudin took his life in another camp by drinking poison.)

It's amazing how we lived through those times to witness deeds and scenes which were performed in the name and cause of so called modern civilisation. We all stood shocked.

There were no small children in our camp. There were a number of young lads between the ages of nine and fifteen. The Germans wanted to do away with them but the stronger camp inmates succeeded in saving a few of them.

After some time we managed, with the Yugoslav's help, to transfer our darling father to our camp. It was the happiest time of our imprisonment. We looked after him and helped him with the little that we had. Also, Nina was of great help. At the beginning, we took him into the hospital, where he got the best attention from our doctors. Mira and I supplied him with medicine from the dispensary, which, of course, was illegal.

After a few months spent in hospital, Daddy was fit to go to work. We arranged some easy work for him in the camp kitchen and all of a sudden, our life was lit up and became worthwhile. In the evenings, we used to gather in our small room and remember the happy days that we'd left behind. The memories used to sweeten our miserable lives. We knew very well, from past experiences, that this quiet period could not last. How well we were trained...

Another date will remain in my mind forever. It was the 4th of August, 1944. A massive selection of men and women throughout the camps in Estonia began. Some leading Germans arrived at our camp with a new story. Suddenly, they became very "humane" and "understanding". They explained that this camp must be moved, seeing that the front was coming nearer. So they came to fetch the weak and elderly people with lorries and we, the stronger ones, would have to move on foot. We knew very well what that meant but felt helpless. To prove to us their honest intention, they appointed the head doctor and the camp eldest (both from Vilna and both very dear

people) to go with the transport. Our happiness was short lived. Our dear father was amongst them too. We felt and knew that this would be their last journey but we stood helpless, and could do nothing. We dressed our Father in a warm fur-lined jacket, which we managed to get for him from the storeroom. We tried to remain calm and not show our fear and pain. Our only hope, Nina, was also not at hand. She had been given leave to visit her parents.

My darling Father's sad look, when he stood on the lorry and waved to us, will remain in my memory forever. How can one forget it? We stood for quite a while, glued to the spot, watching the lorry disappear. Only then did the full impact of the situation reach us and we cried until no tears were left. The lorries returned that same day, but only with the clothes of the poor martyrs. We discovered our Father's coat too. On one of the lorries, we noticed a message scribbled in Russian: "They hit and shoot us". One of the martyrs had managed to write those words upside down on the lorry. We were all shaken from the day's happenings. We lay on our bunks and tried to push the horrible pictures away, but in vain.

In the middle of the night, when the camp inmates were asleep in their barracks, we, the medical personnel, experienced another shock. The famous murderers, Schwartze and Van Botman, appeared. They woke us up and ordered us to prepare the sick patients. Their excuse was the same: the old and sick were to be transported to the new location and the healthy ones would follow on foot. But we knew better. They chose the middle of the night this time because they knew and feared that if they chose the day, the strong men from in and around the camp would rebel.

Amongst the nurses was a mother, who was prepared to do any manual work around the hospital in order to care for her eleven year old daughter, who had T.B. and who was situated in one of the wards. She dressed her child with trembling hands. Her heart was full of sorrow because she knew well that this would be the last time she would see her darling child. It was so pathetic.

It was very hard for me to take leave of my darling, little Elinke, whom I grew to love very much and whom I would miss terribly. When I dressed him, he held my hand tightly. He was full of courage and hope, that one day we'd be together again. He kept asking me whether he could take a sandwich for my Father, who, he knew, had left the previous day. How sweet and innocent.

All our patients looked at us with sad eyes. They tried to find out the real answer. I cannot explain how we felt. Our hearts were

bursting from sorrow. We kissed our dear friends, helped them onto the waiting lorries, and watched them disappear into the dark, black night. The camp was quiet. Everyone was engulfed in a deep sleep.

We returned to the empty hospital. The bunks were deserted. They mourned with us. Suddenly, we remained alone and jobless. I lay on one of the empty bunks and cried myself to sleep.

The next morning, after discovering what had happened during the night, the camp inmates starting thinking seriously about escaping. But how? Where to? Only one man succeeded in escaping. I met him in later years in Paris. From the political news that reached us, we knew that our time, too, would soon come.

Since the last selection, I had not seen my friend Josif. That was very unusual and I was very worried. I went to look for him in his room, where he used to see his patients. The door was locked from the inside and I heard whirring noises coming from within. I became desperate and started to knock harder on the door. After a while, the door was opened and Josif's frightened face appeared. His hair was disheveled, his eyes were fast - I was horrified. He pulled me inside and slammed the door. He led me to the table, which was covered with a layer of cotton wool. He picked up the top layer and what I saw made my heart stop. The whole table was laden with gold teeth, pulled out from the mouths of the poor victims. We looked at each other in utter horror, then Josif took me to the door and whispered in my ear, "You saw nothing", and locked the door behind me. I stood for a while with my thoughts in chaos. Later, I discovered that these golden teeth were brought to Josif in confidence and he was ordered to smelt them and keep his mouth shut. The noise that I had heard was from the burning primus stove, which stood in the corner of the room.

By the 18th of August, the whole camp was ordered to be ready to leave. We took our meager daily ration, a few pieces of underwear and stood in a row to march off to the station. We were relieved to leave the camp, though unaware of our next destination. We were loaded again into cattle trucks. No one cried this time. On the contrary, our spirit was gay and the morale high. We joked and, from time to time, we heard the sound of a Jewish folk song from the corner of the carriage. Mira and I sat in a corner and could not rejoice as we knew that we would not see our dear Father again.

After a few days travelling, we arrived in the port of Talin, the capital of Estonia. We were counted again and loaded onto a big ship. Two hundred and eighty inmates from our transport were taken off, as they were appointed to remain in a nearby camp, Klooga.

There were already two thousand inmates from Kovno, Vilna and other towns. Those destined to remain at the camp were sure that they were the lucky ones, because four hundred inmates from Klooga, mostly old and weak, were brought onto the ship to join us. There was no doubt, that our destination was death. Mira and I were appointed to remain with the two hundred and eighty but there was a strong argument between our friend Nina, the head of the pharmacy, and the Obersharfuhrer, who had orders from the H.Q. to leave us on the ship. They thought that Nina was revealing secrets to us from the Shtab. While the ship was still stationary, we did not know where we belonged, though Mira and I preferred to go with all our friends and share their fate. Suddenly, we felt the ship move. We rejoiced being together with our friends, the condemned ones.

Three days and nights we spent on the blue waters of the Baltic Sea. The days were pleasant. The sun stroked our tired limbs very gently and, for a while, made us think that we were on a pleasure cruise. (What a fantasy.) Even the captain of the ship was surprised at how calm the sea was, as it was mined. The nights however, were very unpleasant and brought us back to reality. On the same ship, we had Russian POW's. When we were asleep, they would slink in and steal the little food we had saved up for the journey.

After three days, we arrived in Dancig. Again we were ordered to disembark and wait for the next instructions. We took advantage of the soft green grass. Tired and hungry, we stretched ourselves onto it. The blue sky, with the warm sun rays, was so merciful. I shut my eyes and tried to transfer my memories, as usual, to those happier days, when I used to spend the summer vacations with my dear family in the Lithuanian forests. But we weren't even allowed to dream in peace. Again there was an order to move on. This time we were loaded onto open goods boats. It was very crowded. We were squashed just like herring in a barrel. If somebody jumped up and sat on the edge of the boat to stretch out his limbs, a knot of thick rope pulled him back into the "barrel". It was unbearable. We stood the whole night, leaning on each other. The next morning was terribly hot. The thirst dried our sore lips. The water from the Weichsl (the canal which we were on), was very salty. We felt like tearing ourselves to pieces. This time, even the sun was cruel to us.

At long last, we reached the shore. It was a pleasure to stretch our numb limbs. Again, we formed a row and off we went, accompanied by armed guards. Amongst us was an elderly woman from Kovno, loaded with pillowcases full of her belongings. She could

hardly move. We advised her to leave it all behind, as we had done previously. We only saved a few sandwiches and an extra set of underwear, which we wore. She would not listen and carried her load till the end, in vain. With our last bit of strength, we reached the gates of the well known concentration camp, Stutthof.

Chapter 6

STUTTHOF

New armed guards took over. The elderly were separated from us and taken straight to the crematorium. Amongst them was the woman with all the parcels. The rest of us were accommodated in big rooms, with sand instead of floors and bunks. We sat around, finished the sandwiches that we had saved, and started wondering what was in store for us. This time we lay down to sleep with full stomachs, but very tired.

The next morning a sad surprise awaited us. Our dearest friend Dr. Kamber had taken her life during the night. She felt that she would not be of any help to anybody, so she took an overdose of sleeping pills which she had saved up for such a moment. With bent heads and sad hearts, we paid our last respects to a great lady, whom we loved and revered. She was lying so relaxed and with a smile on her face. "At last at peace," her expression indicated.

Within the first few days, all of us female inmates suddenly began to menstruate, something which we had not done for many months thanks to something which the Germans had put in our food in the previous camps. As we were supplied with no feminine hygiene equipment, I resorted to tearing the large vest which I had been given into shreds to use for this purpose.

In all periods of life, one needs a friend to share one's happiness and sorrows. Between Mira and myself, this problem was solved. Nevertheless, we enlarged our "family" with four new members. In camp, everybody admired us and named us the "Six Pty. Ltd." We consisted of two from Dwinsk (Latvia), one from Riga, two from Kovno and one from Czechoslovakia. From different walks of life and still like one. This togetherness helped us over a number of hurdles and it played an important role in our camp life.

From this accommodation, we were taken to the Entlausung (delousing depot). There again, all our clothes were taken away from us. I risked my life by hiding my Mother's silver medallion (with some photos of our dear parents, of Josif and of Sifa) as well as an aluminium ring which Josif had made for me, in the private parts of my body. If those objects could only have spoken, they would have told some gruesome stories of the cruel behaviour of men to men. A mockery of modern civilization. I only hope that these objects will be cherished by my dear children too. Some of the inmates were ordered on to the gynaecological table and checked for hidden objects. Every fifth or sixth person was chosen, so again I was lucky to have managed to get away with this act. Mira also hid a few valuables for

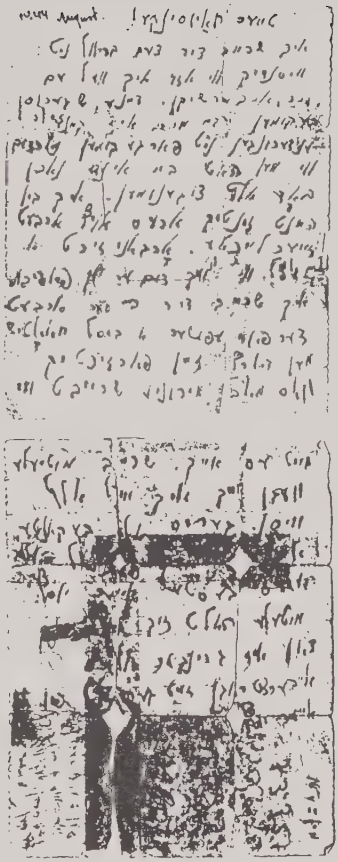
one of our "six-hood". Only after we were outside did we tell this to each other. Once more, after the showers, each of us was given a bundle of clothing. Very seldom did anything fit. For example I, a tall person, received a skirt, high above the knees with the zip jammed half way up, a blouse which would have fitted a child nine years of age and shoes to fit a giant, hard and twisted from age. Fortunately, one of our "six-hood", a short person, received a skirt reaching the floor, so we exchanged. After receiving these "fashionable" outfits, we were accommodated in new rooms. It was very crowded there too. On one bunk lay four women, so we had no option but to lie on the floor (as usual). We pushed our feet under the bunk. The six of us lay tightly packed near one another, and during the night, when our bony limbs ached from the hard floors, we called each one by name and ordered each other to turn right or left. It was quite funny. Our hard shoes served us as pillows, as well as the pieces of torn cloth that we kept inside them for protection against blisters. I had put mine under my blouse, which I cherished more than anything, as this was all I had.

At 4 am, we were woken up by the Capo. Everybody jumped from the bunks, on top of us. Everybody wanted to be ready in time, otherwise buckets of cold water would be poured over us. At 6 am we stood outside, ready. The morning dew was spread like a blanket on the ground. We felt the dampness very well on our half naked bodies. We stood till nine or ten o' clock, then were given bitter tea. At the beginning, we were not employed in any work. The whole day we sat outside and warmed ourselves in the sun (if it was out), a wonderful vacation!

Suddenly the washroom was opened and everybody ran to take a place in the queue to enter. Then an order was given to disperse. Even when we wanted to relieve ourselves, we had to wait for an order and were interrupted when it pleased the Capos. God forbid, if someone relieved himself behind the barrack and was caught, he was severely punished. At lunch time, new problems arose. We were given a plate of soup with one spoon for two. If one had one drop more than the other, fights occurred. It was really hard to blame the poor women. Their morale and spirit were low. When one is hungry, every drop counts. Amongst the "six-hood", this problem did not exist. We shared every bite we had.

I used to converse with Josif over the barbed wire fence, when the Capos were not around. He managed to pass me a spoon and some bread (those things were very valuable in those days.) He also managed to smuggle some letters to me which were written on some thin paper that he found. One letter, I managed to save. We spent about three weeks in Stutthof, every day with the same monotonous routine.

Josif and the letter he wrote to me in Stutthof. I saved it in my shoe.



Dearest Chai-le,
I am writing this letter not knowing whether it will reach you. Your two messages (regards) came (arrived).

Here, there is no more news since the bath (shower) where they took everything away from us. Today is Sunday, and I went to work, very light work, acquired a teaspoon - a spoon - also the first cigarette butt. Great excitement!! - the first cigarette.

I am writing this at work & therefore its a little chaotic. One must be careful. We have to be careful.
How is Mira? (sister). Write how you are. Write my darling, about yourself. I want to know everything about you.

Regards to all & kiss you & kiss you many times, over & over again. All the best. Darling be courageous. "VAS BYT - BE STRONG - BE STRONG then its easier to withstand all - its easier to survive - Be kissed from your Josif.

One day, an official arrived from the H.Q. and demanded five hundred women for work. We knew from previous experience that we had a better chance of surviving if we worked. That was the reason for everyone to hurry and stand in a row to be chosen. The official had to choose from a multitude of hungry women, not a very easy task. He looked for tall or more or less healthy looking women. Being much taller than Mira, I was chosen and Mira was sent to the other side to join the weaker ones. I would never have dreamed of being separated from Mira, so while the official turned away, I ran across to join Mira. From our "six-hood", there were three amongst the five hundred. When the five hundred were chosen, each of them was marked on the hand with a pen, indicating to which hundred she belonged, and was ordered to wait for the next call. We, the ones left out, looked at them with deep envy.

A week passed and the official appeared again and started calling out his chosen women. I forgot to mention that, in camp, we were not called by our names but by our given numbers. My number then was 68901 and Mira's 68900. The first and second hundred women reappeared as they were called out. In the third hundred, two women were missing so everybody wanted to fill their places. It is hard to describe what was going on. Everybody was shouting, begging. It was sheer chaos. Some even applied "protectsia". Mira, myself and Adinka (one of our six) stood among the screaming mob, begging with our eyes, as we had no chance to be seen, never mind heard. However, suddenly, out of nowhere, a Ukranian Capo appeared and started pushing the women aside, grabbed Mira and me by the hands and brought us to the official. He had a little piece of paper in his hand with two numbers written on it, which had been given to him by the gate keeper and which he was going to call out, but she grabbed it out of his hand and gave him our numbers. It sounds a little mysterious, so it did to us too. We had never seen the woman before in our lives. Even now, so many years after that encounter, I often think and wonder what it was that made the Capo pick us out. Whenever I am with Mira, we always talk about it. It will remain a mystery to us for the rest of our lives. Now we were five of us on the good side and one, Adinke, all alone on the other side. We were very upset and restless. As soon as we heard that there was one woman missing in the fourth hundred, we tried our luck. We had nothing to lose. We ran to the same Capo and told her, in Russian, how we appreciated her kindness to us, but that we were very heartbroken as our only cousin still remained on the other side. We had not even finished telling her when she ran up to Adinka and brought her to join the fourth hundred. Now our happiness held no bounds.

As soon as the five hundred women stood ready, we were taken to the showers. Here again, all our clothing was taken from us and we were allocated slightly better ones. I received a red dress which wasn't too bad, wooden clogs which were nothing to rave about and a black coat, still from my great-great grandmother's time. When we all stood in a row to march off, I decided to try my luck again and went up to the German guard and asked him if I could have my coat exchanged. He smiled and answered, "Of course," and suddenly he gave me such a slap on my cheek that I saw stars in front of my eyes. Thanks to Mira, I did not fall down as she caught me under the arms. On our return to the barrack, I asked the camp eldest for a scissors, cotton and a needle and sat down to shorten my coat. From the lining that was left over, I made a turban for my head. Very stylish. The instinct to dress up and look attractive was still inherent in us. That night was our last in Stutthof.

Early the next morning, we were dressed and ready to march off. At the gate I saw Josif standing with tears in his eyes and a stare of sorrow. He managed to cry out, "Already, Chajusinka?" and that was all and forever. We never saw one another again. We were loaded into open trucks. It was the end of summer in Europe. The trees were covered with the last fruit. They lured and charmed us. Nature was so divine. The cool breeze caressed us so tenderly. In the nearby courtyards, children ran around, playing "hide and seek". I could imagine how the mothers amongst us felt, not knowing if their children were alive somewhere. We arrived in Dancig where another train awaited us, to take us to our new, unknown destination. For the first time in our wanderings we travelled like human beings, with six girls in a coupe and slightly better rations. Even the guards showed more understanding. Past our train window, the fields moved like thin, green ribbons. It made us forget, if only for a while, the pain and sorrow we had suffered for almost four years. We spent the whole journey singing and joking. Our greatest comfort came from seeing the destroyed German cities. Upon seeing them, our singing became louder and our spirits higher. From time to time, our guards used to look in. Their expression showed amazement. How could women who had suffered so much and who knew not what awaited them, be so gay? But, as I have mentioned before, we never lost hope and tried to keep our spirits up. We wanted to survive and be reunited with our loved ones.

At last, we reached our destination: Oxencall, a small town near Hamburg.

Chapter 7

OXENCALL - NEUENGAMME

Our new camp had two barracks, a kitchen, sewing room and a small hospital. On our arrival the camp was not yet fenced in. This work was left for us to do. We were placed two hundred and fifty women to a barrack and twenty four women to a room. In each room stood eight three storey bunks with straw mattresses. In the middle of the room stood a long table with wooden benches on each side and a small combustion stove at the side of the room. This was our new home. In comparison with our previous "apartments", it was heaven. The next morning, half of us went to the new job in the ammunition factory and the other half remained to put up the barbed wire fence. I remained with the latter group and Mira went with the first group to the factory.

I remember, it was Yom Kippur Day. Outside, it rained cats and dogs. I stood on a high scaffold and worked on the fence with other remaining women. We were soaked to the bone. We left our daily ration for the evening, to break the fast. After work, when the rest of the women returned from the factory, the "six-hood" sat on one bunk, took out the cold potatoes which we had saved the whole day, as well as our dry bread and thin soup and had a meal fit for a king. After the "royal meal" we had a sing-song lying on our bunks and, with a Yom Tov spirit, fell asleep.

When the fence was ready I also went to work in the factory. Mira and I worked on different shifts so we would meet only when changing shifts and on Sundays, when we were all together. We worked twelve hours a day. From 7 am to 7 pm and from 7pm to 7 am. We spent seven months in this camp, during which time we had many experiences. For the first three months, we had a Lagerfurer, kneaded from real Hitler dough, a murderer in the real sense of the word. His helpers were the German women of the same calibre. In the factory, we had other overseers (German civilians) and every machine had a supervisor. Many of them were Ukranians. At my machine, Group Four, we used to cut the shell to the required length. It had to be done with extraordinary speed and, at the end of the day, the given number had to be produced. During the twelve hours, we had an interval for lunch, which was brought for us from the camp kitchen. Instead of horses, four girls pulled the heavy carriage with the heavy casks full of soup and potatoes. Sometimes, on our return to the camp, other chores delegated by the Lagerfuhrer awaited us.

I want to mention an episode to show the supervision under which we were placed. One evening on our return, we were summoned to a roll call. It had never happened before, therefore it made us wonder what to suspect. It was cold outside and we were very tired and sleepy. Next to the Lagerfuhrer, stood one of our women, the culprit. Her crime was that when she returned to the camp in the evening, she brought in an apple for her aunty, who lay sick in the camp hospital. She got the apple from a German overseer. This was witnessed by the Lagerfuhrer and he demanded to know where she had taken the apple from. The inmate did not want to denounce the overseer, so she lied and said that she found it on the way to the camp. The Lagerfuhrer, an expert investigator, would not believe her and knew that only with severe punishment, would he get the truth from her. He used every punishment possible on her. He took away her weekly food ration, gave her strokes, left her in the cold stormy weather outside for a whole night standing barefoot on sharp-edged coal, and many more cruel punishments, but nothing broke her and she would not tell. He enjoyed this game very much. This was evident from the sadistic expression on his face.

One night, when all the women were asleep, he slunk into her room, pulled her, half asleep, off her bunk, and took her outside into the passage, where there stood a few barrels of water to be used in times of emergency. He pushed her head into the barrel of water. Her writhing moans woke us up. The Lugerfuhrer pushed her again and again until she gave up the fight and told him what he wanted to know.

The wild beast suddenly changed. He took her in his arms, carried her into the room, put her gently onto the bunk and ordered to bring the camp doctor. When the latter arrived, she was instructed to give the best attention and care to the poor woman, whose face was swollen and eyes puffed. From then on, she became the Lagerfuhrer's pet. Every day she received a whole loaf of bread and other special rations from him. It was hard to understand how a beast like that could change overnight into a gentle human being. It was well known to us that the Germans liked the information but hated the informer. This was made clear by that episode. During the evening roll call we could see a small, black figure like a shadow, moving outside the barbed fence. No one really took any notice of it.

One day, there was not enough work at the factory, so my shift was put to work outside. Seeing that Hamburg and the surrounding towns were destroyed by bombs, the inhabitants built small huts away from the cities. Many of those homes were built around our

camp. We were asked to help them with the garden work. The next day, accompanied by a female overseer, we walked out to our new, temporary job. It was fresh and lovely outside. Two girls were dropped off at each garden. My friend Dobale and I worked together. After a while our employer came out to supervise us. He was a short man, with a slight hunchback; very friendly and polite. He took the spade and started explaining to us how the work must be done. It was just an excuse, in case the overseer should appear. Actually, he wanted to talk to us. While explaining, he asked what had happened the last few evenings in the camp. He was the one strolling around the camp, like a shadow, and was very concerned about it. After he departed, Dobale and I remained working. It was such a lovely feeling to feel free, as the overseer was keeping herself warm in one of the houses, and we were unguarded, with the clear, blue sky above us.

At noon, our employer came out again and invited us to his house for lunch. We looked at him, and each other, with surprise, as we knew that this was forbidden for us. He insisted however, suggesting that we come stealthily and one at a time. I went first. The table was beautifully set and he served me fried chops and chips. It seemed strange to me to eat once again with a fork and knife. I could not eat, knowing that Mira hadn't had anything like that in years. I thanked him very much and asked if I could take it with me, as I would like to share it with my sister. He smiled and said that he would give me another portion to take with me. As I started to eat, there was a knock on the door. I jumped and wanted to run, but he stopped me, explaining that it was a friend of his from the same party - a very liberal anti-fascist. The young, good-looking visitor went out to stand guard. After I finished eating, my friend came in and I remained working in the garden. Before returning to the camp, our employer gave each of us a small parcel, and we joined the rest of the girls. Not all had the same luck as we did. That evening, Mira and the rest of the "six-hood" really had a "royal meal".

The next day, too, we managed to work for the same man. This time, his wife was also in and she, like her husband, was very gentle and kind. It was a wonderful experience and gave us a good feeling to come across such warm people. Ironically, she apologised for not being home the day before, as she had to take her son to the "Hitler Youth". Before we joined the rest, she brought each of us pieces of soap and a parcel with food. The next day we returned to the factory, but could not forget the two wonderful days.

On one cold, winter day, we were told that the camp would be fumigated. We did not go to work, but instead were taken to be deloused in Hamburg. We spent the whole day in the cold, waiting for our turn to go into the building. We had to take turns, as all five hundred women could not be accommodated at the same time. While I stood, waiting, with a large group of women, an alarm was heard. The German civilians ran to the shelters. Mothers, pushing prams and holding children in their arms, hurried down below. We remained the only ones in the street, calm and relaxed. From a distance, we heard explosions. The alarm did not last too long and everybody soon left the shelters and went on their way. We too, returned cleaned and washed to the camp. As we entered the fumigated barracks, one of our "six-hood", Elinke, suffered an attack of asthma, from which she suffered previously. We took her outside, in the snow, sat on the steps and surrounded her like a hen and her chicks. So we spent the whole night with her. We placed ourselves in great danger, as leaving the barrack at night was forbidden. It was worthwhile to ease her sufferings. By the way, she arrived a few years ago, with her husband and daughter, to settle in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, she still suffers from her asthma.

The next day, while we were at work, an alarm went off again. As soon as the warning signal appeared, we closed the machines and followed each other to the shelter. This we used to welcome with peace and great relief. Only German destruction could bring us a little comfort for all our sufferings. After the alarm, when we returned to our work, we discovered that the bombs had destroyed the building of the delousing, where we, the five hundred Jewish women, had stood the previous day exposed to danger. Is it not fate? When I read it today, I think and wonder if it really was happening to us. I am sure, that our dearest parents watched over us from above.

Three months passed in tension and suspense. In the meantime, our Lagerfuhrer was removed and another was sent to replace him. Fortunately, the latter was like a father to us. A sharp contrast to the previous one. What a relief it was to breathe freely, even if it was just for a short period. He improved our lot and the conditions in the camp, and cared more for our welfare. We continued with our work at the factory. From time to time, bombing was heard in the distance, but nothing changed our lives otherwise.

Standing at the machine, day in and day out, my mind would wonder and many pictures of my lost youth were conjured up. I remember one instance, among many. It occurred on a Friday. I stood at

the machine, attending to my job. In my hand was my triangular knife used to sharpen the steel shell after cutting. Suddenly, again, pictures of my home appeared before me. It was Friday evening at home. The machine was belching noises and I moved my hand automatically in rhythm with the machine and there I saw, so vividly, my dear Father returning from shul. He greeted the whole household with a broad, "Good Shabbos" and kissed us all on our foreheads. The two lit candles, in the beautiful silver candlesticks, gave such a bright and holy light. My darling Mother, in her Shabbos clothes, and we, the three sisters, were ready to welcome the holy Shabbat. It was such a lovely feeling. My eyes filled with tears and I saw everything around me through a mist. The hot, cut-off edge of the shell, fell onto my hand. I jumped from pain and shock and pushed the sharp end of the knife into my hand. It all happened so quickly, and when I came round, I found myself lying on a bench and Adinka, one of our "six-hood", was sitting next to me and wiping the perspiration from my forehead. After spending several days in the camp hospital, I returned to work.

One day I was taken with a few other inmates and accompanied by a few female overseers, to Hamburg to fetch some parcels from the H.Q. We travelled by a small electric train. During the whole journey, we were pushed into one corner by our overseer. She was afraid that we might start up a conversation with the civilian passengers. At every station the train would give a jerk, so we held onto the metal pole. At the last station, while I was holding onto it, I suddenly felt a paper being pushed into my hand. I thought that it was a used train ticket. An elderly woman, who stood near me, winked and smiled at me before she left the train. I clenched my fist around the paper and followed our guard, and the rest, out of the train. Only then did I discover that, what the woman had given to me, had been a little paper bag containing a few sour sweets. On my return to the camp, we really had a ball. These sweets were a perfect dessert to our evening meal. It was the end of 1944, and we were ready to celebrate Channukah. We took advantage of the good Lagerfuhrer and decided to celebrate it with pomp and ceremony, to sing and dance and be gay.

It was on a Sunday, when both shifts met together. We put a few tables together in the middle of the long passage of the first barrack. This was supposed to be the stage. We, the audience, lay on our stomachs, on the bunks facing the door, where we could watch the wonderful performance that was prepared for us by a group of

talented girls from Vilna, Kovno, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, Poland, Germany and Austria. They sang and recited from classical Jewish works. Some sang arias from popular operas, danced ballet, mimed etc. Amongst them there were quite a few professionals. Some of the audience sat on benches near the door. Late in the evening, when the concert was in full force, we heard a warning signal from the doorway, that the Lagerfuhrer and a few of the female guards were coming towards the barrack. We did not move and carried on with the concert. We were later told that the Lagerfuhrer and his company had stopped at the door, watched for a while and then turned to the group and said, "Let them enjoy themselves," and they went on their way. His remark lightened our hearts and we continued our singing and dancing until the early hours of the morning. The same Lagerfuhrer wanted to punish us one day, in order to show the overseers that he didn't favour us, as they were of the opinion that he was too good to us. One evening, when we returned from a hard day's work, he met us at the gate. His excuse for the punishment was that we make too much noise on our return and that we disperse too soon before entering our barracks. He instructed us to put our cans in the barrack and to come out again and march, four in a row, in the camp grounds. We did not wait, and started marching. To make it less boring, we sang some Russian marching songs. The Lagerfuhrer arrived with a hidden smile on his face and called out, "Loos, return to your barracks. I cannot punish people who sing while being punished." His mood would change when he would receive new, cruel orders from the HQ, though he never fulfilled them.

He was very impressed with our Channukah concert, what he saw of it, so we arranged to repeat it on Christmas, for the higher factory officials. Here we had a free hand to put on the show with more aplomb. We used four tables for a stage and a few blankets for curtains. The concert was a terrific success so, for New Year, we were rewarded by the factory management. They sent each of us new blankets, new tin dishes and mugs and slightly improved food rations. Our rooms, and morale, took on a new look.

The female overseers did not like the humane approach of the Lagerfuhrer towards the women prisoners and they denounced him to the HQ, which removed him from the camp. When he took leave from us, we all stood with bowed heads and cried. By the way, after the liberation, our group of women and also prisoners from a male camp where he was Lagerfuhrer, sent a letter to the British HQ asking for his release. He was released and allowed to return to his home, in Hamburg, where he was reunited with his wife and daugh-

ter. Some of our girls managed to visit him and he sent regards and best wishes to all of us, for our free and happy life. He was replaced by another Hitler-man. To him, the law and the Fuhrer were higher than everything.

In the meantime, another hundred women were brought to our camp. Most of them were either gypsies or criminals. Life in camp became very unpleasant. One day, I was very exhausted and felt like having a rest, so I complained to the Lagerfuhrer that I had toothache. (The right man to complain to!) He collected a few more women, with different complaints, and sent us to a doctor and dentist in Hamburg. The overseer took us to a ruined building in the heart of Hamburg and we started climbing a spiral staircase. It was frightening as only the third floor of the building was intact and standing on top of the staircase. There, we found a few patients, lying on wooden bunks, looking at us with frightened and pleading eyes. The dentist asked me which tooth was aching, took the rusty instrument and, without an anaesthetic pulled out my tooth. Luckily I showed him a back tooth, so when I smiled, it was not seen. (Our looks still meant a lot to us.) From then onward, I did not complain anymore.

Every time, when there was an air raid, an alarm was heard, the machines stopped, lights switched off and our hearts would fill with joy and hope. We were happy that our enemies were receiving heavy blows on the front line and that our allies were near, if not on the ground, at least in the sky above us.

On about the 3rd of April 1945, while we were working on the night shift, there was a big air raid which lasted much longer than usual. Our supervisors and overseers seemed very disturbed and frightened. We were ordered to clean the machines and be ready to return to the camp. Early the next morning, as the first rays of sun appeared, we were awakened and summoned to a roll call. We were then given half a pound of bread each and were marched to the station. From there, we were taken by train to an unknown destination. Such things had often happened, but this time we sensed that the end of the war was near. We gathered this from our German overseers' behaviour. We noticed that they had civilian clothing in their suitcases and when we were nearing our camp, they quickly changed into those clothes and some of them disappeared. We heard later that they were all recaptured and put on trial. We doubted whether we ourselves would survive the war, as we were too weak and could hardly move around.

At last, after a long walk, and feeling thoroughly exhausted, we reached the famous camp, Bergen-Belsen.

Chapter 8

BERGEN-BELSEN

The camps where we had previously been had been labour camps, but B.B. was an extermination camp. Proof of this was easily seen as soon as we were led into the camp. The road was strewn with corpses and half-dead bodies. The latter pleaded with their eyes for help. We felt helpless ourselves and wondered how soon we would be in the same situation.

On the gate, we noticed a yellow flag. This was the sign of the plague, to warn people off. As we entered the camp, a terrible sight awaited us. Living corpses were moving slowly, with hungry looks in their shrunken eyes. Dead bodies were piled high near each barrack, and through the barbed wire, the male prisoners looked at us, as if looking for a solution. It was an horrifying scene.

Suddenly, we heard somebody scream, "Mother!" All the mothers among us turned around. The true mother was not even allowed to stop and talk to her twelve year old son. She did not see him until the liberation. We were led into a barrack, where the three-storey bunks were already occupied. Four on one bunk was far from comfortable, but I would have been happy to find a place on one of them. Mira, fortunately, found a place with three others and I had to be content with a narrow strip on the floor, between two rows of bunks, under a window. At night, when the women had to relieve themselves, the door was too far to run to so they would jump over me, then through the window. The nights were a real nightmare and during the day we suffered severely from hunger and thirst and from the frightening scenes around us.

Every morning the bodies of those who had died during the night were pulled out of the barracks by the inmates. During the ten days we spent at B.B., we had nothing to eat, not even water to wet our dry, sore lips.

We were once taken to a pond and were told to quench our thirst there. The water was covered with green moss. It stank of dead bodies. I dared not taste such water, of course. I preferred to swallow my own salty tears which ran down my bony cheeks.

One day, while walking in the camp grounds, I came across a small tin of Gibbs toothpaste. I picked it up and walked into the barrack to offer it in exchange for something to eat. Against the walls, women were half sitting and staring at me with empty, hollow

looks. One could not guess who was alive and who was dead. I passed each one, offering the small tin. How naïve of me ... Suddenly a woman stirred from her place, picked up her bony behind and pulled out from under herself, five, dry carrots. She had probably been saving these for a later time but, now that she knew her end was near and nothing would save her, she offered them to me in exchange for the tin of toothpaste. I ran happily to share my wonderful gift with my sister and friends.

Some other day, a Capo appeared at our barrack and asked if anyone would like to earn a plate of soup. Who would not? I joined a group of women and was marched off, accompanied by some armed Hungarian overseers to the camp kitchen. There they handed metal drums to every two women and each pair followed the other to a nearby well, to fetch water for the kitchen. This was our task and for this, we were promised a plate of soup. We were looking forward to it. When we returned to the well the second time, we noticed a woman approaching, carrying two pails. Our overseer's face suddenly brightened. He picked up his rifle, aimed and pulled the trigger. The woman fell, her pails dropping to the ground. The overseer came nearer to the woman and pulled the trigger again, finishing off his sadistic game. We were shocked and very upset. When we returned to the kitchen I turned around, left the drum standing and ran as fast as I could to my sister and friends, without the soup, of course, but alive. The Hungarian guards enjoyed their murderous games, which used to pass unpunished. On one occasion, while walking to my barrack, I saw a girl sitting on a window sill, combing her hair and singing. Suddenly, a shot was heard and she fell off the sill onto the ground, with the comb still in her hand and the song unfinished. Our lives were so cheap. Everybody could do to us whatever they wished.

I mentioned in my previous chapters, that to bear children in the labour camps was forbidden, and here, in the extermination camp, it was legal. What a paradox. But what can be expected from degenerated people?...

The last few days, I too felt that my time had come. The hunger and thirst drained us of all our strength. The growing piles of corpses around us had a terrifying effect on us. Every night, heavy bombing was heard, but still no end. "How much longer?", we used to ask.

On the 14th of April, early in the morning, I climbed through the window and joined a group of women, who worked in the kitchen in another part of the camp. I could no longer bear to see Mira and

our friends dying a slow death, so I decided to try my luck. However, the notorious Belsen Beast, Irma Grese, noticed me and realised that I did not belong to the party, so she struck me hard on my back with a stick. I cried out from pain and returned crying to the barrack.

This did not stop me from trying again the next day. At the gate, I heard that many of our S.S. men had fled and the Military Police had taken over. This time there were no obstacles and I managed to get out with the working group. We were taken to a kitchen and given vegetables to peel. Here, I managed to appease my hunger by eating some raw vegetables and even managed to fill my pockets for my sister and friends. At lunch time, we received a little bit of thin soup, which I placed in my can in order to take back and share with the rest.

Suddenly, at midday, we heard a loud noise outside. As we opened the doors of our wooden shed, the German militz opened fire at us through the windows and thin walls. Out of fear, I grabbed a chair with a backing and tried to protect myself by turning it in all directions, from which the shots were coming.

Suddenly, I saw the girl on my left, holding her hand to her mouth. Blood was spurting everywhere. On my right, a woman was screaming from pain in her arm and I sat there in the middle of it, unharmed. How I escaped from being shot, I do not know. We were sitting in a pool of blood. Everything happened so quickly. I could hardly grasp what was happening around us. Suddenly, the doors opened wide and there stood tall soldiers in tan uniforms. They were our liberators, the British. Only later did we discover what had happened. The British army had reached Bergen some days before and did not know that, nearby, was the infamous extermination camp, B.B. One British tank lost its way that day and accidentally drove into the camp. When the occupants beheld the horror, they quickly returned to fetch help. During their absence, there was unrest in the camp and the Military Police opened fire to restore order. That was their excuse, anyway.

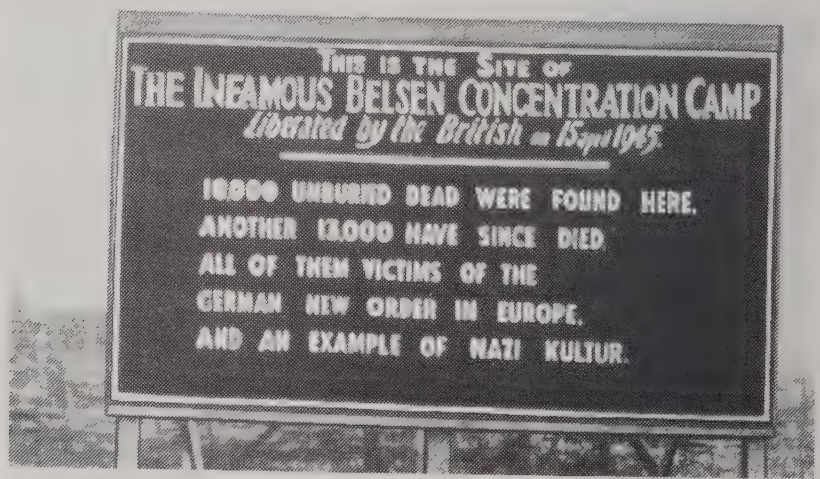
All the way from the gate stood a long row of tanks. This scene is hard to describe. The allied soldiers were throwing cigarettes and chocolates into the gathered crowd. Some of the women ran to them, lay down on the ground and kissed the wheels of the tanks. The men, who were watching through the barbed-wire fence, threw themselves onto the fence and started biting the wire with their bare teeth, desperate to reach their liberators. The wounded were taken to hospital and the others were attended to by the British Red Cross. At that moment, I only wanted to be with my sister and friends

One of the open graves in Bergen Belsen

Josef Kramer and Irma Grese ("the Beast" of Belsen)

Brigadier -General H. L. Glyn Highes, the liberator of Belsen

A survivor of Bergen Belsen



The Sign outside Bergen Belsen Concentration Camp

and to share with them the wonderful news and the food that I had managed to save for them. When, with great difficulty, I reached the women's camp, I emptied my pockets and threw myself around my sister's neck, crying, "We are free!"

The date of the 15th of April will remain in our memories forever. At long last, the awaited hour had arrived, but we were all too weak and sick to rejoice. After four years of hardship, constantly driven from camp to camp, losing our dear and beloved ones, we were completely drained of our physical strength. But hope was in our hearts and the will to survive was strong. After all, we managed to reach a part of our goal.

One could hear faint cries from all around, "Water, water..." The British Red Cross installed pipes through the camps with water to quench our thirst. They also brought barrels into the barracks, containing beans and other condensed foods, but even here, it was impossible to get to the food. Everyone was pushing, some even pushed their heads into the barrels. The camp inmates broke into all the storerooms, four of which contained loaves of bread which had been poisoned. These were to be distributed to us by the Germans in order to kill us off. However, thanks to the sudden , unexpected entry of the British, the murderous plan misfired. Nevertheless, quite a number of inmates had a taste of the bread, before this information leaked out, and departed from this world without tasting the liberation.

During the first days of liberation, typhus and diarrhea epidemics spread through the camp. Thousands and thousands of inmates who had managed to see the blossoms of freedom, could not enjoy the fruits. How cruel can fate be? We, the "six-hood", also got diarrhea and could hardly walk. It was funny to watch everybody hurrying to the toilets, which stood in the woods nearby. We rarely reached them in time. To ease matters, the British Red Cross placed barrels next to the barracks for this purpose, but here again, we would not use them, on principle, and relieved ourselves around the barrels as we knew that the cleaners now were our previous overseers. This was our revenge. After some time, we were disinfected and cleaned and all transported to a new, clean camp, previously occupied by the German soldiers and the S.S. officials. The old barracks were burned down, only the mass graves were left for posterity.

A new life began for us with ambitions, dreams and disappointments. At the beginning, we were assigned a room for twenty girls. There were not any bunks prepared as yet, just straw mattresses. We lay there, weak and dejected. What now? What did the future hold for us?

One day, a Czechoslovakian friend arrived and asked if any of us was feeling strong enough to start working. A British lady from the Red Cross had approached her and asked her to get twenty women for easy work at the Red Cross depot, D.A.D.O.S. I did not want to let such an opportunity pass, so I stood up, still a little shaky, and joined a few more women. Off we went on a new, unforced assignment. We were fetched with a lorry. Our English lady welcomed us very warmly, gave us some medicine and asked us to come again. Our work was very easy. It consisted of sorting out clothes that had been taken away from the Germans, as well as other items received from overseas organisations to be distributed amongst the poor survivors. With the lady's permission, we firstly threw away our camp "uniform", which had served us lately as day and night dress, and picked out some new, fresh clothing. What an exciting period it was in our dreary lives. The lady also allowed us to make bundles of clothing for our roommates. As soon as we unpacked the clothing on our return, it worked like magic. Everybody, no matter how weak, stood up, changed into clean dresses and everything around us became alive. It seems that this instinct to dress up and to look neat, had never left us, and what a blessing...

The next day, Mira and the rest joined us and we all went to work. Each day we felt stronger from the medicine we were given and from better food. Whereas before we were all skin and bone, now we were slowly beginning to look like human beings again. Even the new British soldiers that replaced the old, could not believe the cruel stories that their friends had told them and which they had read in the press.

After the liberation, there were quite a number of surviving children, aged between five and eight years - each of them with a rich past. Some were saved by an uncle, granny, aunt etc., while others were alone in the world. They were all placed in new, clean barracks and were looked after by a group of women. One of them, a friend of mine, approached me one day when I lay in bed, suffering from a few broken ribs which I sustained from falling onto railway tracks. She asked if I could manage to obtain some clothing for one of the little girls, who had not even a vest to her name. I was only too happy to oblige. I got up immediately and walked, still shakily and in much pain, all the way to my working place to get some clothing for the little girl. From that day on, I would visit the children every evening, loaded with beautiful clothes for all of them. They would not go to sleep and waited for my arrival. As soon as I appeared on the

The Dramatic Society in Bergen Belsen

Two surviving girls and me in Bergen Belsen

A group of Lithuanian survivors of Bergen Belsen taking a rest from their work at the Red Cross (top)
With friends and liberators in Bergen Belsen (bottom)

doorstep, I could hear cries of, "Mamusiu idi, mamusiu idi!" (Mummy is coming, mummy is coming!) It used to warm my heart and I loved them dearly.

In B.B., we had a Russian Gemeinde, like an embassy, whose aim it was to collect all the ex-Russian citizens and return them "home". The hope that our dear Sifa was alive made us register for the last transport. But a sudden note from a friend, who had left with a previous transport, described the terrible conditions of the transit camp, and made us change our minds. When the Russian officials came for us, we used to hide. They pestered us for a long time, as the last transport was due to leave shortly. We asked the British elders to intervene. It did help and the last transport left without us. So we remained in B.B., with the hope that it was only temporary. New problems arose. What should we do? Where could we go? The gates of the world were locked to us, the poor refugees. Even our dream and hope - Israel - was prohibited for us. But we, the Sheerit Hapleita (concentration camp survivors), were strong minded and full of hope that we would overcome the strongest barriers.

In the meantime, the death sentence for our previous leaders was pronounced. They were sentenced to hang. Everybody in the camp celebrated. We used every possible mode of transport and even walked to the execution site in Lunaburg. Perhaps it sounds cruel to rejoice at such an event, but at that time, we had only one thought and wish: revenge for our six million dead.

On the 25th of September, 1945, the first congress of the Sheerit Hapleita took place in the British Zone. I was chosen, along with another girl from Kovno, Masha Ralsky, as a delegate from our block. The congress lasted three days. It left a very strong impression on me. Quite a few great, Jewish world personalities were present. Among them the late Sam Brodetzky, Samuel Silverman, member of the British parliament, Shlichim from the Jewish brigade and many foreign correspondents.

The first day started with a mourning march to the local cemetery, where a tombstone was unveiled at the big, communal grave of the thirty thousand dead who perished in B.B. The whole place was decorated with blue and white flags, tied with black ribbons. The chazan made Hazkara and the head of B.B., Josef Rozensaft, made a speech for the dead. Sam Brodetzky, with tears in his eyes, finished his very moving speech with these words: "The Jewish night has ended, the sun of the Jewish people has risen and in its light we will fight." A small, surviving boy said Kadish at the grave. It was very sad and touching. The mourning ceremony was concluded with Hatikva.

The second day started with an "El Malei Rachamim" for the dead. The great hall of the B.B. bioscope, where the congress took place, was splashed with different placards, screaming, "Six million gassed Jews", "World, where is your conscience?" "Open the gates of Eretz Yisrael" and many, many others. Pictures of famous Jewish personalities, the blue and white flag with the sybolic yellow star, were also displayed on placards. There were many interesting speeches and so concluded the second day.

On the third day lively discussions developed from the previous speeches. Some resolutions were passed. One of them was to proclaim Eretz Yisrael a Jewish state and arrange the Aliya of the first million Jews and others to follow. The camp's dramatic society put on one of their successful plays and so concluded the first congress of the Sheerit Hapleita in the British Zone (Germany).

During this time, the Jewish brigade helped organise schools for the children, trade schools for the older youth, political parties and other institutions. In the evenings we gathered in a hall to hear interesting lectures and discussions. Life slowly stabilised itself. Our "six-hood" dissolved as two returned to Russia to look for relatives, one was taken to Sweden with the Red Cross and one returned to Czechoslovakia.

Mira and I forged a bond with other girls and we moved to a smaller barrack where we had a flat with two small rooms. We were four girls, devoted and very close, as before.

As soon as the illegal Aliyot to Israel became active, I signed on, without Mira knowing, but had to abandon the idea once Mira discovered my intentions. Thus we remained in B.B., waiting for the next turn of events. Many illegal Aliyot left, but just a few reached their destination and the rest returned to the camp to await the next attempt.

In the meantime, Mira married. She and Jacob occupied one of the smaller rooms and we continued with our work in D.A.D.O.S. Then things started happening to us too. A cousin of ours, who was in the Jewish Brigade and whose purpose it was to bring families together, helped us find our family in France. He also reunited us with Chaim who survived Dachau. After the war he had contracted T.B. and was placed in a T.B. Sanitarium, Gauting, in the American Zone. I used to visit him every two months. The first time, I arrived unannounced. Firstly, I had to obtain an entrance permit. The trains were so packed that the only means of entry was climbing through a window. A friend of mine joined me. All the way we had to stand as every sitting place was occupied. It was a long journey and very

Mira, Mira's husband Jacob and myself

tiring. At last, we arrived exhausted and dirty at Gauting station. At the gate of the sanitarium, we had to announce ourselves and tell the guard whom we were visiting. After a while we were allowed to enter the grounds of the sanitarium. I stopped the first inmate and inquired about Chaim. Suddenly a young man, dressed in battle-dress and ready to climb into a jeep, turned around and ran up to me. It was Chaim. He heard his name mentioned. We had not seen each other for three years and he had been sure that we had perished and here I appeared out of nowhere. We stood for a long time, without uttering a word, just hugging and kissing each other. Such scenes were quite common after the war, when families were reunited after such long separations.

Our cousins from France had visited us in Kovno before the war and were prepared to rehabilitate us. It did not take long for them to organise our papers.

At last, the day came when we had to leave the cursed, blood-soaked, German earth.

It was June 1946, a day to remember and celebrate yet we left with mixed feelings. It was hard to take leave of our dear camp family, with whom we travelled the long, hard road. Travelling in the train to France, the events in camp B.B., where we had spent the last fifteen months after the war, blurred, but other memories remained deeply engraved in my mind. I can hardly remember anything about the journey between Bergen and Paris. It was so hard to accept everything. Had it really happened to us? What did the future hold for us?

Thinking back on all the events since 1941, I get the feeling that there is a reason for my and Mira's survival. It was sometimes a silver and sometimes a gold and sometimes a lead thread winding through this tapestry of our lives, that led us to safety - to these days. Sifa - in Russia, Mira - in Israel and I - in South Africa.

Sifa also survived many heartaches in Siberia, but we met eighteen years later, in 1959, after a long separation.

Can we call it Chance?...

That fate chose us to go to the right and not to the left?

That we were chosen among the five hundred women to go to the labour camp and not to remain in Stutthof, where inmates were dying in the thousands, each day, from starvation?

That the British tank lost its way that certain day and brought the long awaited liberation, before the Germans managed to execute the murderous plan that they had in store for us?

That the bullets missed me by an inch, while they struck the two other girls next to me?

And is this Chance, that I met your Daddy, when he was visiting Paris after the war?

Is this all Chance? Are we all destined for certain deeds in this world?

Would we have acted differently if... if... if...?

Chapter 9

PARIS AND ANNECY

Mira, Jacob and I arrived in Paris in June, 1946. We were among a group of men, women and a few teenagers, all survivors of the concentration camps and now on our way to a new life. Our first transit camp was in Paris. Some were going from here to South America, some to the U.S.A and some were staying on in France for some time. We were amongst the latter.

On our arrival, we were met by representatives of Jewish relief organisations and taken in open lorries through the streets of Paris, to a hotel. The streets were full. Mothers pushing prams, children holding on to them, students, young people, hand in hand, so carefree. The three and four storey buildings seemed like skyscrapers to us after the German ruins.

At first, they brought us to the famous Jewish quarters of Paris. Jews were everywhere. We were led into a large hall, where a royal welcome awaited us. The tables were full of all kinds of refreshments. After we had something to eat and drink, we were taken to the hotel in the centre of Paris and it was explained to us how to get back to the hall for dinner.

I was sharing a room with another woman from the transport. She was on her way to Brazil with a surviving son. (By the way, she was the mother of the son who called out, "Mother!" in Belsen.) We had a bath (what a luxury) and lay down to have a rest, as we were very tired after the long journey and most eventful day. Suddenly, I heard somebody calling our name in the passageway and then there was a knock at the door. A tall, handsome man entered, accompanied by one of the hotel porters. The man introduced himself and explained that he was our cousin Lazar's friend. Our cousin phoned him and asked him to look us up and help us if we needed assistance. He sat at the foot of my bed and stared at me as if I had come from another world. He kept asking if we really came from B.B. and when we nodded, he repeated a few times in French, "It is not possible, it is not possible," tears running from his eyes. He kissed me on my forehead and promised to come the next day and take us to the station. After he left, my companion and I fell asleep. It all seemed like a dream.

At about four pm, we were woken up. We dressed and gathered in the lobby, as arranged, as we had to return to the Jewish

quarters for dinner. Amongst us were quite a few German and Austrian Jews. One of them said that he knew the way, as he had been in Paris before the war. We asked him if we could join him, as we were strangers in the city. He was not very keen to have a big crowd following him, so we, about twenty of us, decided to go on our own. Not one of us could speak French but luck was with us.

While waiting for the Metro, a Frenchman turned to us and asked, "St. Paul?" That was the name of the station we needed to reach. We must have looked like Greene. We nodded and he told us to follow him into the train. We stood around him like chicks and watched him for further instructions, but when the train neared the next stop, we noticed the name on the wall, "St. Paul." We nodded to him as a sign of thanks and left the train. We arrived again to a warm welcome and a warm meal. We were showered with questions about our experiences. We sat to have dinner and noticed that the group with the "know all" leader was not to be seen yet. Only after dinner, when we all stood ready to return to the hotel, they arrived, exhausted and cross. Unfortunately, their leader had lost his way.

We spent a few days in Paris, window shopping, walking in the streets, watching the happy crowds and, in general, appreciating our long awaited freedom.

Our cousin's friend arranged everything for our departure. He arrived and took us to the station. We travelled the whole night but I could hardly close my eyes. My mind worked overtime. So much had happened in the last few days and so much was to follow. I looked at my reflection through the compartment window and wondered to myself, "Is this really me?"

Early in the morning, we saw a sign at the station which read, "Annecy", our destination. We recognised our cousins immediately. With them was quite a crowd and they all waved to us. It seemed that everybody had come to welcome us, and what a welcome awaited us. Everybody's eyes were filled with tears of joy and happiness.

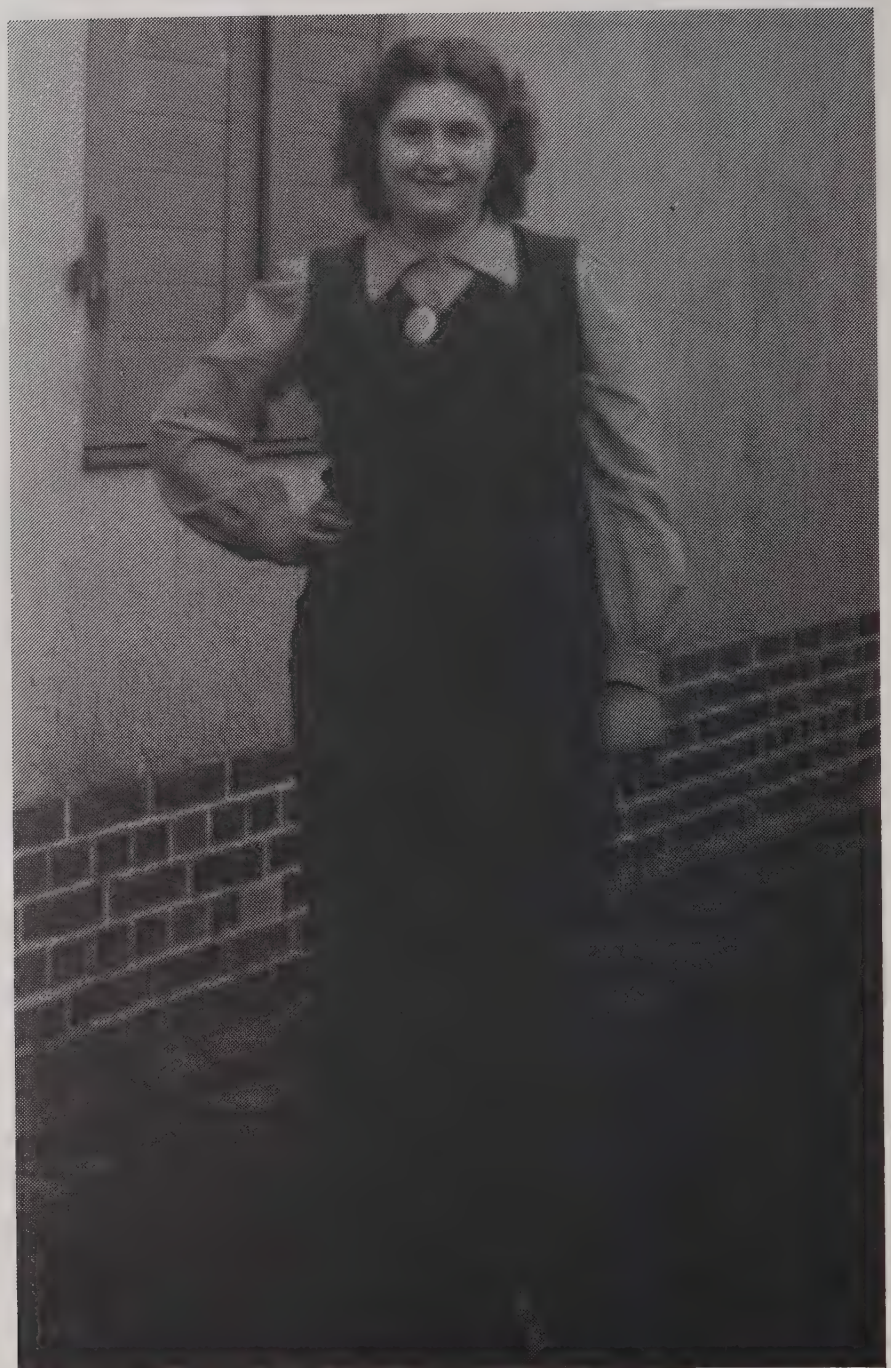
We were taken to our new home and here, at the foot of the famous, beautiful Alps and around the blue waters of the divine "Lac D'Annecy", a new life with new hopes began for us.

We were received here with open arms. Mira and I helped our cousin Sifa with her house chores. My cousin Lazar, an engineer in the Renault factory, always had time to sit and listen to me on his return from work. (By the way, he was the one to encourage me to write down my experiences.) He introduced me to a friend, a young girl from Vienna, older than me, in whom I found a very sincere,

interesting friend. She arrived in Paris, before the war, to study art, but the war had changed her plans. She joined the Resistance where she and Lazar became very active. Nearly every day, we used to rent a small boat, row out into the middle of the lake, drop in an anchor, lie down on the side benches and dream of a beautiful future, but also remember the sad past. The tall, beautiful Alps reflected graciously in the blue waters and the dusk changed their colour to many shades. An artist would have made a prize painting, but I could only watch and sigh.

Lazar was not very happy with my figure. He thought that I was too plump and should do something to improve it, so he decided to take me mountain climbing. The selected mountain was the Parmelan, one thousand, nine hundred thirty five metres high. It was not an easy task, but what would a woman not do to improve her figure? Four of us, Lazar, Katherine (our friend), Bob (Lazar's eldest son, aged seventeen) and I (the greenhorn), with haversacks on our backs, started our climb one Saturday afternoon. We left at 2.30 pm, when the sun was not too hot, and reached the half way mark at midnight. At the Chalet, we joined many other climbers, sat around and ate our packed food with great appetite. Such a walk gives one an appetite. Then we went up to an attic where we all lay down to rest on piles of straw. It was a great pleasure to stretch our tired limbs, but the thought that it was a pleasure walk and not a forced one, made it much easier. At 2 am, we continued our climb. The sky was lit with stars from above and thousands of coloured lights glowed from the streets of Geneva below. It was such a magnificent and exhilarating sight. At 5 am, Lazar was the first to reach the top. The last few metres were the hardest for me, as we had to climb on a steel rod and I felt very exhausted and was not very experienced. So I decided to remain at the bottom. But Lazar would not rest and insisted that I should try. With much effort, I did reach the top. Lazar presented me with a daisy for my bravery. I still have this pressed in one of my books. The morning was very cold, so everybody got into the Chalet, specially reserved for the climbers. I took out a thick jersey and sat on a nearby table and lost myself in the divine surroundings. To watch the sunrise from behind the famous Mont-Blanc was an unforgettable experience. The peak of the M.B. was engulfed by the sun's rays. How could I forget it? I turned to Lazar and asked him the date, as I wanted to memorise that wonderful event. The date was the 4th of August, 1946, the day my dear Father was shot two years before. No, I would never forget that day...

My cousins from France who brought us from Bergen Belsen in 1946 - Sifa, Claude, Lazar and Bob



A month after the liberation - having gained about 100lb

I sat for a while with my mind in chaos. After lunch, we started decending. It was no joke at all. It was much harder than the climb. When we reached the bottom, we joined Mira, Jacob and the rest of the cousins at the lake and had a picnic.

After that wonderful walk, I spent a few days in bed with aching limbs, but it did serve its purpose. I lost a few pounds. Lazar used to take me on lovely walks and I spent lovely, interesting evenings with Katherine.

In the meantime, we received papers from our American cousins to go to the United States, but the Russian and Lithuanian quota was overfilled and the only thing that remained for us was to wait patiently. The summer months were very pleasant but with the coming of autumn, life became very dull. I spent a lot of time writing letters and keeping in touch with my old friends whom I had left behind in Belsen, some of whom were on their way to Israel. The postman knew me very well and every time he neared the gate, he rang his bicycle bell to let me know that there were letters for me. Lazar understood and realised that such an inactive life was not what we needed and dreamed of. So he advised us to move to Paris. It was a bigger city with more possibilities. We agreed and got ready to leave for Paris. Lazar got us a letter of recommendation so that we would be able to get into a hotel, at least until we found our feet. It helped us in the beginning as we could not speak French and it was not too easy to go around without having made friends yet. The hotel was actually a military one, and whenever one of the military men was on leave, we could get his room. All three of us had to sleep in one bed and we were not allowed to wash anything there, not even our underwear and stockings. It was very hard and inconvenient. The city was vast and the people were strangers. We had no friends and had to start from the very beginning.

Paris, the city of beauty and romance, was always the city I dreamed of visiting, but under different, better circumstances. At the same time, when I look back, I was thankful that I was alive, with all my limbs, and decided to overlook all those difficulties and enjoy every minute of it.

We started to look for work. We met one of our camp inmates there, a Polish tailor who opened a tailor workshop there and offered Mira some work, which she gladly accepted. We used to spend nearly the whole day there as it was very central and in the evening, we spent forty-five minutes in the Metro, on the way to our hotel. The Jewish Relief Organisation, C.O.J.S.O.R., supplied us with ration

coupons and we received fifteen hundred francs each per month from them. (Equivalent to two pounds at the time.) With these coupons, we bought two meals a day at the canteen (quite meager ones), but it was better than nothing and it kept us going.

After the war, I had hoped to become a theater sister, but unfortunately, I came across some obstacles here. Being a survivor, they knew I had no intention of making Paris my permanent home and I was also not very fluent in French. For these reasons, they were reluctant to accept me and I had to abandon this idea. I was advised by many people to enter Ort, a Jewish trade school, to choose a profession I fancied. I followed the advice and took up "Houte Couture", which I enjoyed very much. My instructress was a girl from Kovno, with whom I became very friendly and I used to spend many pleasant weekends in her company.

We still lived in the same hotel. We went to the tailor's place, where Mira worked, to prepare food and do washing. They were very kind and did not mind.

One evening, while at supper in the canteen, I met a young man from Poland. During the war, he had been a Partisan and now, a correspondent at the Paris Jewish press. We had a lot in common, especially loneliness and hunger. After work, we used to meet at Mira's working place, read together and, not having any money even to see a show, we used to explore every street in Paris by foot.

One Sunday, I remember, it was my birthday, and my friend arrived with his briefcase and a broad smile on his face. "I brought you a birthday present Chajale," he said, and fished out from the briefcase, a small slab of chocolate which he received from an uncle in Switzerland. We broke off a few pieces for Mira and Jacob and the rest we finished off very slowly as we wanted to make it last as long as possible. It was a beautiful thought, and very tasty too.

Every two weeks, on our return to the hotel, we discovered our suitcases in another room, one flight higher, as the previous owner of the room had returned from his leave. One evening, we were called into the office and told that we would have to look for other accommodation, as the last officer was due back in a week. It was a shock for us, as we did not know where to turn. During this time, I managed to make a number of friends and some of them, those with a knowledge of French, went with me to look for accommodation, but without success. I would leave early in the morning and return late in the evening, after walking the length and breadth of the city. I was tired and disillusioned. The only accommodation that remained for us

was a bench in the park. But here too, as always, a ray of hope appeared on the doorstep of our despair.

One evening, on my return from my unsuccessful "apartment hunting", Mira announced to me that her boss had managed to find a room for us in a Jewish home. Jacob and Mira had seen it already. It was a big room in a flat on "Place De la Republique". When I came to inspect our new lodging, the landlady smiled and said, "Sorry, I have no bed for you." Mira had told her that she had a smaller sister and here I come in, taller than all. Our landlady was a Jewish woman who was unfortunately paralysed, with three children. During the war, her husband and two sons were taken to the camp, "D'rancy", from which very few returned. But after the war, all three returned to find her ill, though she moved around the flat and managed her chores with her little daughter's help. She was so happy to have her family together again but after sometime, her husband left her and the children, and walked off with a friend of hers, whom she had befriended during the war. That made her very bitter towards the whole world. I was very sorry for her, but we felt her bitterness very much.

The room we rented was large, with one big bed, a table, a few chairs and a wooden bench, which served as my bed. It was much too short for me, so my feet were always hanging down. (I suppose it was my fault, I was too tall.) For Mira and Jacob, I managed to get some sheets and a blanket, but I was not so lucky. So I cut the old, velvet tablecloth in half, with the landlady's permission of course, and it served as my pillow, my blue morning-gown was my bottom sheet and a brown winter coat, which I received from America, was my blanket. The landlady would not allow us to use her kitchen, so we bought a small electric plate, on which we used to warm up our meager meal. We made the best of it. In winter, the electric power was cut off twice a week, so I washed myself in ice-cold water, took a glass of wine, and left for work. There were many days when I walked about hungry. Believe me, it was not very pleasant, when I would go to visit some friends, hoping that they would offer me something to eat, and after such a long walk, no one was home. I returned disappointed and hungrier than ever.

In the meantime, Jacob managed to get work as a furrier. At the beginning, I got no pay in Ort, just a free lunch, but after some time, they managed to obtain a subsidy from the government and only the better pupils were allowed to remain. I was amongst these and we got paid per hour. I worked from 8 am to 6 pm, so at the end of the month, I got quite a nice pay and it became much easier. As soon as we

earned some money, the relief organisation withdrew its monthly help. One day, while I was preparing a hot meal for Mira and Jacob, as I used to return earlier than them, there was a knock at the door. It was my friend, the journalist. He looked very pale and starved. He could hardly talk. I quickly warmed up my portion of meat with some cauliflower and put the plate in front of him. Only when the plate was clean did he explain that he had hardly eaten in the last few days. As soon as his stomach was full, he became a little bit "fresh". I could not shout at him as the walls were too thin, so I just pointed with my finger towards the door. He felt very ashamed and left. After that, I did not see him for a long time. I made a lot of friends and still kept in touch with my old ones, who at long last, though with great difficulty, had reached the long-dreamed of Israel. In the evenings I attended interesting lectures. At work I was successful and got a lot of encouragement from my instructresses. To boost my morale, a friend of mine, who was ready to leave for Israel, passed her job over to me, just a few evenings per week. Her uncle was busy writing a book about the Jews under the Nazi Regime and needed somebody to type his notes in Yiddish. I enjoyed it very much and later took another job, also with no pay.

After some months, we decided to change our apartment, as it was too expensive for us. We felt more confident already and knew how to go about looking for a new residence. We found a much cheaper hotel in Belleville. Mira and Jacob had a room in the main building and I got a small room in the courtyard. It consisted of an iron bed, a wardrobe, made from a few planks nailed together, and a small, shaky table. Instead of a basin, there was a dish and a jar for water, which today would be a valuable antique. Everything was miniature, but bugs were in a big measure. Never mind, I survived them too, though at times it was very unpleasant. I spent most of the time in Mira's room. My neighbours were Gypsies, Mulattoes, Spaniards and others - a wonderful collection. During the week, I hardly saw them, but on weekends, when I stayed home to clean Mira's and my room, as Mira worked on Saturdays, my neighbours decided to air their Persian carpets over my open window. Once, after I returned from Annecy where I spent my leave, I aired and cleaned my room. In the evening, when I lay in bed to sleep, I was awakened by a mob of bugs, who moved into my bed with me. My sheets were red and I was frightened to death. I lay down on the cold floor, where I spent the whole night. The next morning I complained to the hotel management and they fumigated my room. Very often in the middle of the

night, I would hear a key being pushed into my keyhole. I would jump up and call out, "Who is there?" I would hear the old watchman's voice, "Sorry, I made a mistake." Being old and blind, he often led couples into my room. This is a short synopsis of my "royal apartment".

We used to gather very often in Mira's room and enjoy ourselves. Jacob liked to see cowboy films so I used to stay with Mira, read, write letters and listen to music. One evening, when Jacob was out, I remained with Mira to clean a goose which Jacob's boss had given him as a present. We never liked that messy job, but knowing what a lovely meal awaited us, it made us laugh and joke about it. Suddenly there was a knock at the door. We called out, "Enter", and hid our dirty hands in our aprons. The door opened and two men appeared on the doorstep. They introduced themselves as our cousin's friends from America. They had been asked, by our cousin, to visit us and to see how we were living and to provide help if we needed it. A nice time they chose to come.

After seeing the big, fat goose, they must have thought that we lived like lords and were short of nothing. They invited us to their hotel, as they wanted to give us a gift from our cousin. After our visit to their hotel, we returned somewhat richer, with a few boxes of washing powder. (The goose did it.) We could hardly control ourselves, but as soon as we were outside, we burst out laughing. This funny episode makes us laugh even now, so many years later.

Coming home one afternoon, I stopped to visit our previous landlady. I found her scrubbing the floor with her good leg. It made me very sad to watch her do it, so I took over and finished scrubbing the whole flat. She was very touched and with tears in her eyes, kissed me and apologised for her stern behaviour towards us.

From then on, every Friday, I used to appear with a bunch of lovely gladioli and scrub and clean her flat for Shabbat. I remember, when I got engaged, I came to tell her the good news. She insisted that I bring my fiance to meet her. She remarked that she wanted to be sure that I got the best. Bless her. I used to come and take her out to lectures and shows.

It was March, 1947, Pesach in Paris. All the societies arranged a Seder for their Landslait. The Russian/Lithuanian Society was also very active and they prepared a lovely Seder for their many refugees and friends. A very big crowd gathered in a large hall. The long tables were laden with all kinds of refreshments, really fit for a king. Even the four glasses of wine were not missing. Advocate Abramowitz,

from Kovno, was at the head, leading the proceedings. A modern Hagada was prepared and we were gay and happy. Here, at that evening, I met my husband, your Daddy and Grandfather. He sat opposite me with another young lady, who he had brought along. She was half Jewish but had never attended a Seder before. Morris wanted to show her how it was celebrated. We exchanged many questions and answers. When I heard that Morris was from South Africa, I asked him if on his return, he could pass on our regards to a friend of ours, Chajale Golomb, with whom we kept in touch. Morris gave me a small notebook and asked me to write in the address. What a coincidence it was. They were both from Benoni and Morris knew her very well. Morris tried to make everybody drunk by adding wine to their goblets. The atmosphere was gay and the morale, high. Mira, Jacob and I left earlier, as we did not want to miss the last Metro. I heard later, from the other girls, that at the end of the evening, Morris was quite drunk and very happy and so he kissed all the girls before he left.

The next evening, it was the second Seder night and I was invited to spend the evening at my friend Rochale from Shavl. There I also met another girl from the same town and the three of us celebrated the second Seder on our own. During the evening, Rochale was called to the phone and when she returned, she said that Morris Ziskind phoned to inquire if I was with them and promised to join us later. After some time, Morris arrived and took us dancing in a very cosy, pleasant restaurant. At times I felt very uneasy, as Morris danced the whole evening with me and the others remained seated. At the end of the evening he brought me back to my hotel.

After that day I did not see Morris too often, as he was travelling a lot between Switzerland, Germany and Paris. Actually, his trip to Europe was with the intention of looking for some surviving family. Unfortunately he found no one from his immediate family. In Germany, he discovered two sisters, his second cousins, and helped them out of Germany and sent them off to join their brother in South America. On the 6th of April, a ball was arranged for the refugees. It was held at one of the great hotels. Jacob came home with three tickets. I was not keen to go and preferred to remain at home. Mira and Jacob insisted that I come and would not go without me, so I joined them, though very much against my will. As we came to the hotel, there was a very big crowd waiting to enter. On the steps, at the entrance, stood Morris and a friend, to whom I was introduced. He was an ex-marine, who Morris had met quite a few years ago in Odessa.

The evening, which I had not looked forward to turned out to be very pleasant and most enjoyable. I spent the whole evening dancing with Morris. From then on, we spent a lot of time together, going out, visiting the Louvre and other places of interest, attending theaters and lectures. I tried not to get involved with him because he kept telling me that he was not the marrying type and I did not want to be hurt. Many times I used to say to myself that I would not go out with him anymore. But when he appeared on the doorstep, I changed my mind, as I was hungry for real friendship and that I found in him. As I mentioned before, I was surrounded by many friends but I don't know what it was that pulled me to him. He wore an old raincoat (when we arrived in South Africa, mice finished it off) and an old fashioned suit, but there was something about him that I liked. He was very warm, sincere and understanding.

My friend Frieda, with whom we spent our last days in Belsen, stopped in Paris on her way to Australia. For a few nights, she slept with me in my "royal apartment". We spent the whole night talking. I showed her Morris's photo and told her how I felt about him. She was worried and kept telling me that he looked too old for me. Unfortunately, Morris was away while she was in Paris so she could not meet him. Her only concern was my happiness and that I should not be hurt. After she left, I often thought about her remark. Morris used to wait nearly every evening for me, in a café outside Ort. We returned to the hotel or went out somewhere else. It was a lovely feeling to know that there was somebody who cared for me. On my next leave, when I went to Annecy, he followed me. Lazar and Sifa liked him too. One evening, while having tea, Lazar mentioned that he had a friend who had been in hospital since the war. He could be discharged now but, unfortunately, he had no clothes with which to leave the hospital. Morris made sure about his size and promised to arrange something. That was Morris. Ready to help when help was needed. He left for Paris before me. When I returned, the same day, I was busy cleaning and dusting and, at the same time, trying on new clothes which we had received from cousins in America. There was a knock on the door of Mira's room. When I opened it, there stood Morris with a parcel in his hand. With him was a friend of his, who was none other than my old friend, the journalist. We were introduced. We looked at each other, he blushed and we acknowledged our introduction. Morris did not realise or suspect that we had met previously. In the later months, the three of us used to go out together. Once, when we were left alone, he apologised to me, with tears in his eyes, and wished me luck.

Morris and me at a dinner for the survivors in Paris 1947

The parcel that Morris had brought contained a lovely suit that he had managed to get from a South African friend, who was visiting Paris and whose size was just right. I sent the suit to Annecy and enabled Lazar's friend to leave the hospital. Morris introduced me to some South African friends who were all very kind to me. We spent a few very interesting evenings with the famous Jewish actor, Maurice Shwartz, who was visiting Paris. On the weekends, we used to go on lovely outings. I was enjoying every minute of it, but in my heart, I had a nagging fear that the balloon would pop and I would remain alone with my dreams.

One evening, Morris arrived to take me to the theater. It was too early so we went for a walk. Suddenly, he turned to me and asked if I would return with him to South Africa, as his wife. It was so sudden and unexpected, that I could not utter a single word. I could not believe that it was happening to me, but at the same time, I was somehow frightened. I accepted the proposal, but wanted to go and break the news to Mira and Jacob immediately, instead of going to the theater. Morris stopped a few people and offered them our tickets for free, but everybody just stared at us in disbelief and went on their way. No one accepted them as they all thought that we were pulling their leg. So the tickets remained in Morris' pocket, unused.

On the 15th of November 1947, we were married. I remember it was pouring outside. We needed a witness for the court, so Morris brought Kalman Lurie, whom he had met in Paris. We had a party in Mira's small room. Our cousin Sifa, her youngest son Claude, Katherine and her fiancé (the tall gentleman, who came to see us on our arrival in Paris), my instructress and a few friends all came to celebrate with us.

Morris was happy to take me out of my apartment and we moved to his hotel. The next few days we were busy shopping and organising our departure. I had another three months to finish my course in Ort, but Morris insisted that I should leave it. My instructresses were very sorry, but at the same time, they were happy for my sake.

The worst part of it was saying farewell to my darling sister and Jacob and my friends that I had made during my stay in Paris.

Chapter 10

ISRAEL AND SOUTH AFRICA

We left Paris for South Africa, via Israel, on the 20th of November, 1947. It was very hard for me, not knowing when I would see my dear sister again. I cried enough in the quiet, but that is life. "C'est la vie". On our arrival in Israel, many survivors knelt and kissed the holy earth. It was very touching. For me, it was all like a dream. So much had happened in such a short time. We booked into a hotel, Malon Sela, on the corner of Hajarkon and Allenby Streets. In Israel, we met a lot of friends. Late Yankale Rolas was the one with whom we spent most of our time. Morris had been friends with him since they were young. I also found my cousin Nachum, in Kibbutz Gvat, as well as other relatives. The first outing was to Jerusalem. We visited Bethlehem and Rachel's Tomb, explored the old city, traveled in Arab busses where they were all very kind. We witnessed the day when U.N.O. voted for the establishment of the Jewish state on the 29th of November, 1947. We danced in the streets the whole night and the next day. Then the War of Independence began in full force. The same busses we had travelled in returned from Jerusalem with bullet holes. Morris, bless him, used to go exploring the most dangerous places. I used to go looking for him and, on one occasion, I was pulled into a courtyard by frightened neighbours and was scolded for being so careless. It was nerve-wracking but it did not stop us from going to Haifa and other places. While visiting a friend of mine in Haifa, we heard shooting. We could see people through the window, running for shelter and the ambulances loading wounded soldiers. It was very frightening and we were in the middle of it all. Our friends advised us to leave, but Morris was not keen. He wanted to be a part of it. One day, we went to stay in Kibbutz Gvat but there, too, was unrest. The previous day, a driver from Gvat was returning from Tel Aviv with a lorry full of workers. They were ambushed and brutally murdered. My cousin, Nachum, was supposed to have driven the lorry but had a cold and was replaced, so he survived the massacre. They, too, begged us to leave as I was pregnant already.

At last, we decided to leave. We were taken to the airport by a heavily guarded bus. We had to sleep one night at the airport. We flew for thirty-three hours and arrived at Palmitfontein airport on the 12th of January, 1948.

Now, more than forty years since the end of the war, my darling Father's remark is still very vivid in my memory. "I'm the luckiest and richest man in the world. I am endowed with three millions." (Meaning his three daughters.)

I can say the same now. I am the luckiest and richest person in the world. I am endowed with two millions, a son Ari and a daughter Bella. In addition, I am blessed with a lovely daughter-in-law and son-in-law and eight adorable grandchildren and above all, I am blessed with my dear husband Morris [now deceased]. May God bless them all.

My only hope and daily prayer is that my loved ones should be spared from the sufferings and afflictions that their mother, grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins had to endure.

My dearests, may your futures be filled with joy, good health and happiness.

With fondest love,

From your loving Mom and Bobba, Chaya

Dr Kascenevsky (first on the left). Picture taken during our visit to Vilnius in 1975

Morris, Ari, Bella and me in Muizenburg, South Africa (1953)

Ari's family: back row (l-r) - Benjamin, Avi, Elisha, Ari, Daniel, front row - Rachel and Vivian

Bella's Family: standing - Richard and Yael, seated - David, Bella and Ruth

GLOSSARY

Aliyot - immigrations to Israel

Akzia - selection

Arbeitsamt - committee of elders in the Ghetto

Capo - overseer

Channukah - Jewish festival of lights

Chazan - cantor

El Malei Rachamim - prayer recited for the dead

Eretz Yisrael - (Hebrew) the land of Israel

Erev Pesach - Eve of the Jewish festival of Passover

Greene - novices

Hatikva - the national anthem of Israel, meaning "hope" in Hebrew.

Hazkara - prayer recited for the dead

Juden Frei - free of Jews

Kaddish - prayer recited for the dead

Kneidlach - traditional Jewish dish

Kommandant - German head of the camp

Lagerführer - a German rank

Landslait - people from the same home town

Obersharführer - a German rank

Pesach - Jewish festival of passover

Seder - the Passover meal

Sheerit Hapleita - survivors of the Holocaust

Shlichim - (Hebrew) delegates

Shul - Synagogue. (Jewish place of worship.)

Shabbos - the Jewish sabbath.

Yom-Tov - Jewish holy day

Wehrmacht - a German rank

A Granddaughter's Comment

by Ruth Codron

Having heard many stories of my Bobba's childhood and the war years, each one repeated on countless occasions, I have always felt like I could never forget what happened to her and to the rest of my unknown family. It was not a real fear for me, until recent years, that one day I would have to recount these stories to my children and grandchildren, without her there to verify them. As a child, she only ever told me the "happy stories", those with miraculous outcomes or humorous parts. These included the incidences of the stinking potatoes, the silver sugar basin and the losing and finding of her medallion. As a grown up however, I have had to face the other stories with not such favourable conclusions, although I have not yet fathomed the full extent of the atrocities she has witnessed and endured and I doubt that I ever will. Parts of her life still seem somewhat unreal to me, like blurred parts of a movie seen many years ago. Yet there is one thing I do know, I never want her story to be faded or forgotten.

Although hearing verbal accounts directly from my Bobba has always had the most impact on me, the task of transferring her original, type-written memoirs onto computer has given me a different perspective on her life. It has allowed me to somehow become incorporated in those years which shaped my existence but which I was not a part of. Those many times when she narrowly escaped death and was miraculously chosen at random to join those destined to live until the next selection, made me think that had she not been so lucky, the whole course of our family history would have been altered. Neither my mother, nor I, my sister nor my brother, would have been alive today, nor would I have the privilege of knowing and having as a grandmother, such a courageous, selfless and strong-willed woman. These traits have been exemplified throughout this book and throughout her whole life. Her relationships with her parents, her sisters, children, grandchildren and indeed all who know her, serve as a shining example to me in my life. Whether it was her fierce desire to survive, the watchful eye of God, mere fate or a combination of all three, I still find it a miracle and count my blessings that she was chosen to be one of those whose job it would be to recount her stories and the stories of those who were silenced. This

job she has done so perfectly in writing her memoirs, and in helping her make this copy of her story, I felt as though I have somehow helped carry on the legacy. This gives me inexplicable pride and pleasure.

About the Author

Chaya Ziskind was born in Minsk in 1920 - the third daughter of Leibe and Ida Tarschis.

The family soon moved to Kovno in Lithuania where they lived until the war.

After the war Chaya went to Paris where she met and married Morris Ziskind. After a short sojourn in Israel they went to Benoni, South Africa where they lived for forty eight years.

In 1996 Chaya immigrated to Melbourne, Australia to join her daughter and her family.

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